



Irina Strelkova

PLAYING THE GAME

We thought long
and hard
and then did say:
First good
and evil,
then two seasons,
Then stronger
than them we called
night and day,
Then odd and
even numbers,
for many reasons

Irina Strelkova

PLAYING THE GAME

A Short Novel

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ЧЁТ И НЕЧЕТ

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SUMMER



CHAPTER ONE

The station-master in a sun-bleached cap, which had once been red, showed him where the fifth carriage would be stopping and then asked, "Why haven't you brought anyone along to give you a hand, Colonel? It only stands here a minute."

"We'll manage on our own."

Stepanov knew that no matter how much luggage his wife, Natalia Petrovna, had with her, she would still manage to get the children off in time. They would already be standing in the corridor by the open doors and the cracked greyish-yellow earth would be racing towards them. It certainly was not fun arriving somewhere like Chupchi for the first time at the end of summer on a cloudless day, which was grey from the sizzling heat: by noon it would be well over thirty and the wind would be scorching hot and there would not be a patch of shade anywhere.

Stepanov had arrived in Chupchi in the early spring. Whereas piles of dirty slushy snow had been strewn about the northern Russian town he had left behind and the sun had danced impishly in the icy puddles, here, in his new posting, the steppe was already ablaze with colour: rippling seas of wild red poppies amidst brilliant green grass under an arched deep blue sky and russet and mauve mountains in the distance. And after frolicking to its heart's content in the steppe grasses, the wind would scamper into the small town.

However, by May, the best month of the Russian spring, the steppe hues had already begun to fade fast: the sky had paled, the grass had turned to weeds and the bare saline patches on the steppe made it look like

a worn-out sheepskin coat. To a stranger it seemed that the end of the world was at hand.

"We aren't young forever, are we?" a shepherd by the name of Museké Sadvakasov once remarked to Stepanov. "When we're young, our eyes sparkle and our skin's all smooth like silk but when we get old our eyes start running and our skin dries up and gets all wrinkled," he ran his palms over his face. "We get old but we don't want to die: we want to go on living for a long time as old people. We get pleasure from seeing our young ones growing up."

Stepanov had been invited home by the shepherd along with his colleagues, Major Korotun and Lieutenant Ryabov. The major had served in Chupchi for longer than any of the other officers and Ryabov had been born and brought up in a *stanitsa* near Alma-Ata and spoke Kazakh reasonably well.

In any case, an interpreter was not needed because old Museké started off at once in Russian.

They were sitting inside his yurt. The thick felt kept the heat out. Its hem had been flapped up and a gentle breeze blew through the lattice frame. The shepherd stirred some *kumys** in a large half-empty enamel bowl with a ladle and then poured some out for his guests. In came a sullen, wild-looking boy who helped Sadvakasov to graze his flock.

"Yerkin! How about playing chess and then *togyz-kumalak*?" Ryabov said to cheer him up.

The lad whisked a chessboard out from under some blankets, scattered the pieces across the felt-lined floor, picked up a white and a black pawn and put his hand behind his back.

"How old are you?" asked Stepanov.

"Nearly fifteen," Museké replied for him.

* *Kumys* — fermented mare's milk.— *Ed.*

"Same as my Masha," Stepanov thought to himself. "Yerkin's a fine name."

Yerkin stretched both fists towards Ryabov and after a moment's hesitation the lieutenant pointed to the right one: the lad opened his fist to reveal a black pawn. Ryabov groaned in dismay. Seeing that Ryabov was playing against a simple herdsboy, Stepanov was surprised that he had not taken the black pieces straightaway, without drawing lots. What's more, he could have even given the lad a lead.

As he chatted to Museké, Stepanov kept a close eye on the game. The black pieces were in trouble. Ryabov was frowning and wiping his glasses. The wild-looking boy remained impassive.

"At moments like this, decent people admit they've been beaten," said Korotun, not without satisfaction.

Ryabov made another couple of moves and then gave in.

"Now try *togyz-kumalak*!" said Museké to his assistant. "Our guest's only played chess to please you but what he really wants is a game of *togyz-kumalak*..."

Yerkin turned the board over. Oval grooves had been made in the surface of the other side.

"*Togyz-kumalak* means 'nine pellets' in Kazakh," Ryabov explained to Stepanov, taking a handful of small black counters from Yerkin and arranging them in the grooves. "The game is all to do with odd and even numbers. You just have to be good at maths. It's just the game for the likes of us."

The lieutenant and the lad battled away fiercely, capturing each other's counters until Museké finally announced that the lieutenant had won.

On the way home Stepanov asked if Yerkin was Sadvakasov's grandson.

"No," replied Ryabov, "his youngest son. His

eldest lives in Alma-Ata and is none other than Academician Sadvakasov, the famous geologist. The locals say he's been trying to get his father to move to town for a long time but Museké's dead against it and Yerkin's backing him."

"Sadvakasov knows what he's worth," remarked Korotun.

In summer Museké moved south towards the mountains not with Yerkin alone, his large yurt was now crammed full of boys of all ages. His town grandsons, looking very much like Yerkin, also had narrow faces, prominent cheekbones and aquiline noses but otherwise they were entirely different: you could easily tell they came from a large town and from well-educated families by the easy, self-confident way in which they behaved in front of adults. Missing his own children, Vitya and Masha, Stepanov sadly watched the shepherd's rowdy and energetic tribe and thought how grand it would be to hand his Vitya over to them for the whole summer.

He knew that Vitya would certainly not mind living in Chupchi.

On the day Stepanov had at last sent his wife a telegram telling her to come, a captain from regional headquarters had come to see him. He opened his bulky briefcase, handed over a sealed packet and began hurriedly dumping plastic bags containing water and tiny little fishes on the table.

"I've been ordered to hand this small fry over to you. Minnows, bullheads ... um ... sorry, can't remember them all. Here's the list and some instructions for your son from the General."

"For Vitya from General Karpenko?"

"The General's very fond of aquariums," said the captain, grinning. "One wall of his study at home is

all glass and water. Believe me, I've seen it with my own eyes!"

Stepanov stared in dismay at the plastic bags on the table.

"What on earth am I to do with them now? My wife wrote and told me that Vitya's given all his pets away to his friends — his hedgehog, his tortoise, his hamster, and all his fish, and he's left his aquariums with his best friend. When he saw on the map that Chupchi was in the middle of a desert, he decided to take only his cacti with him."

"I see..." said the captain sympathetically. "Yes, that is tricky."

"And I can't very well send them back."

But then, luckily for Stepanov, Lieutenant Ryabov appeared and exclaimed, "Why, how splendid! What marvellous fishes! Yes ... not a bad selection at all. Why, and you've even got some water-plants."

"Lieutenant Ryabov!" said Stepanov imploringly, "I can see you know what you're talking about when it comes to fishes. Maybe, you could find somewhere to put them?"

"Why, of course!" replied Ryabov, picking up the bags, one by one, and holding them to the light. "Korotun's got some plexiglass. We'll knock together a splendid aquarium and it'll be even better than a bought one."

"Well, in that case, please make two straightaway. Why haven't we ever thought of this before? In weather and surroundings like these, it's simply essential for our men to be able to sit by water and see some greenery."

"Yes, water's very good for the nerves," said Ryabov enthusiastically. "That's been proved scientifically. We'll put an aquarium in the men's canteen."

"Now that's an excellent idea!"

Next day an aquarium full of water was already standing in Stepanov's flat. The little fish glittered like multi-coloured lights. A thin layer of sand lay on the bottom. Yes, one thing was sure, there was certainly enough sand to go round here...

As the hot dusty carriages rolled past, Stepanov searched with his eyes for his family and when he failed to see them, he became inwardly rather alarmed although he certainly should have got used to partings and reunions with his family by now.

The train ground to a halt and the buffers clanked. Some shiny iron steps stopped opposite him and a young girl in narrow jeans, carrying a rucksack on her back and a bag in her hand, jumped into his arms.

"Masha!" he gasped, as if not expecting to see her.

"How lovely you've come to meet us yourself!" she replied joyfully through her tears. "Dad, you're so tanned we hardly recognised you!.."

Then suitcases and boxes began magically appearing on the platform from the fifth carriage. Passengers of all ages, wearing casual travel clothes and slippers, put down the luggage which Stepanov knew so well, making friendly comments as they did so: "Don't worry, everything's fine." "Your family'll be out soon." "Watch out, mate, there's something breakable in here..." "Goodbye, Colonel, all the best!"

And then his wife stepped down in a smart light-coloured suit and high-heeled patent shoes, which were the last word in fashion at the moment and which all the officers' wives in Chupchi were simply mad about. Next came Vitya, calmly carrying a cage in which a furry brown creature was scurrying about.

"Welcome home!" Stepanov gave Vitya a strong

bear-hug and then gently pecked his wife's powdered cheek.

The train moved off past the semaphore.

"Dad, hey, Dad!" Vitya tugged at his father's sleeve. "Masha and I had an argument in the train about whether there's really a desert here."

"There's a semi-desert."

"A what?..." Vitya would have preferred to be moving to a real desert with mirages, sand-dunes and real-live tarantula spiders. "And what's that over there, Dad? An ancient building of some kind?" Vitya pointed at the clay building with the round dome.

"No, it's a *mazar*, a mausoleum, and it's quite new by the look of it." Stepanov looked at his son's disappointed face and beckoned to him. "Come on, I'll show you something special."

Some wooden barriers ran for about two hundred metres along the railway track at the end of the platform.

"See that?"

"Yes, barriers to keep snowdrifts out. So what? They're everywhere."

"No, you're wrong... Take a better look."

Vitya jumped down from the platform. The barriers were bending under the weight of the heavy sand. It looked as if a low ridge of sand had drifted here from another part of the steppe, a long way away, and the barriers were hardly managing to keep it off the rails.

"It's quite common in these parts," said Stepanov in a deliberately nonchalant tone. "Shifting sand, I mean."

"A shifting sand-dune? How can it be moving if your feet don't even get stuck in it?" Vitya squatted and scratched in the sand with his hand. "Look how dense it is!" An ordinary-looking bush

with crooked branches and narrow grey leaves was poking through the surface. "There's something growing in it."

"Yes, a saxaul. That's the only thing that can stop shifting sand."

"Saxaul?..." said Vitya in a quivering voice "Saxaul?!" He stared with great respect at the remarkable desert bush whose miserable-looking branches were growing underfoot.

"What have you found over there?" called his mother impatiently.

Miles and miles of steppe and sands. No, this, of course, wasn't anything like the beautiful old town on the Volga. But what was the use of recalling all the divine places in the world when there were others far worse than Chupchi, after all! Not just semi-deserts, for instance, but one-hundred-percent genuine deserts! And treeless tundras and impassable mountains...

"Let's go to the car!" she called for she was most eager to see what the town was like for it was there and not out here that she would be living.

Stepanov looked inquiringly at his daughter and tried to work out what could be the matter. She was standing aloofly as if she had not just arrived here for the first time but, on the contrary, was just about to leave Chupchi, which had bored her stiff, and was setting off in some unknown direction.

* * *

Shortly afterwards Stepanov met Museké and took him home to meet his family. The shepherd's numerous orders and medals tinkled and clinked as he stepped slowly and decorously into the dining-room ahead of his host and then all of a sudden his eyes lit

up like a child's and he rushed over to the lit-up aquarium, exclaiming, "Why, magic fishes! Gold-fishes!"

Masha noticed that he spoke with a funny accent and that he was wizened and looked just like a little boy in a baggy suit with lots of large impressive medals. Museké listened carefully to Vitya explaining what he fed his fishes on and how he separated the spawn. Then he stroked Vitya's head and said, "My, what a professor you are!"

"Will you take him on to help you next summer?"

"Why not!"

"And will you give me horse meat to eat?" asked Vitya.

"Horse meat?" repeated Museké uncertainly. "Well, not just horse meat. We'll eat mutton, too. And I'll buy tins of beef and noodles and fish in tomato sauce. All right?"

"But," said Vitya excitedly, "I've got nothing against horse meat."

Stepanov intervened: "I told him how I ate horse meat when I visited you and he's read about Genghis Khan's men and would like to try some horse meat himself..."

"We'll see to that," promised Museké.

"What does a shepherd's assistant have to know?" asked Vitya.

"Zoology. And also botany. Botany's taught badly at schools. My lads were taught it and I know how little they know about herbs and grasses. A shepherd has to know every herb there is. Kazakh people have never ploughed the land because they didn't know anything about the soil. They grazed their herds and every father taught his sons about the flowers and plants because that's what mattered most. Then there's arithmetic—you've got to know how to count

your sheep. And you've got to know the stars, too, because they show you the way." Museké noticed that Vitya was listening attentively and that his ears stuck out slightly and were rather pointed at the top, which was a sign of keen observation and a good memory.

At the mention of flowers and plants Vitya took Museké over to the window to look at his cacti. Museké touched their spikes and said, "No, a sheep won't try eating these."

"Experiments are being made to introduce spikeless type of cactus as fodder. But is it possible for Mexican cacti to adapt to our deserts? Cacti have got very short roots and they absorb the moisture which condenses on the surface. And the kind we have here, I read, has its roots growing fifteen metres deep and draw moisture from down there."

"That's right. The grass in the steppe's short but its roots run deep. People in the steppe have got to have deep roots, too," Museké glanced at the colonel. "As he knows botany, he'll be able to help us."

"He's only read about it in books," remarked Stepanov, "but from you, Museké, he'll get practical experience."

At table, Natalia Petrovna, who was unfamiliar with Kazakh customs, gave Museké generous helpings of all the hors d'oeuvres she had prepared in the traditional Russian manner. Masha noticed that he was enjoying their hospitality. After all, he had not come to the Stepanovs expecting them to display their knowledge of Kazakh customs.

They began talking about one thing and another.

"How's General Karpenko?" asked Museké respectfully. "I've heard he's sick."

"Who said that?" asked Stepanov, surprised.

"The locals. They know Karpenko—he's famous

because he fought against the counter-revolutionary bandits during the Civil War. I myself served under Karpenko during the last war. Karpenko was a division commander and I was a driver. We got as far as Riga. A lot of people from here were in Karpenko's division. For instance, Kazimir Ludvigovich, the local doctor, worked in our division. He saved the General's life once but when he got wounded himself, nobody could do a thing for him and so he died. He was a good man, he was. People remember a good man and ask after the general. He spent a long time in hospital in the spring..."

"He's all right now," replied the colonel who knew he had to be careful of everything he said because he was informing not only Museké but many other people all over the steppe who were evidently concerned about the state of Karpenko's health.

"That's good to hear," said Museké, inclining his head.

He ate slowly and with dignity, carefully and unembarrassedly picking up bits of food off the plate, as he was used to, with his delicate hands which did not look worn from working on the land in frosty and windy weather. He respects other people and their customs, thought Masha, but doesn't want to adapt to them and always acts the same with everyone.

She noticed the old man was studying her in a friendly and astute manner. Her father told him that his daughter's name was Masha, which was short for Maria. The old man renamed her Mariam at once.

"Come and see us in the summer, too, Mariam. I won't make you work," he said good-humouredly. "You can have a rest and try our famous *kumys*. We'll find a bridegroom for you... Do come..."

CHAPTER TWO

Salman arrived at the cantonment very early in the morning. He did not sleep at home in summer for why bother when there were so many mausoleums he could stay at in the steppe. Of course, he did not sleep in *akyn* Sadyk's mausoleum, which was the handiest, but there were other, more convenient ones where nobody would disturb him and he could sleep more peacefully than at home. What's more, he had a lovely soft quilted blanket to sleep on. You couldn't do without a blanket in a mausoleum because it was chilly at night. He had pinched it off somebody's fence. It was old and couldn't be worth much. Its owners could easily buy a smarter one with a green or mauve silk cover at the local department store. He knew that the Kudaibergenovs, its previous owners, needed it much less than him and could afford anything they wanted for themselves and their children. He, on the other hand, had stopped asking for anything long ago. School uniforms were on sale at the store but Salman would not be bought one. "When you go to school, you'll get issued with one. If they want you to attend lessons, they'll have to fork out and buy you a uniform." His mother had said the same the year before and had then boasted that she had saved money for the school had indeed issued him with a woollen uniform, a pair of shoes, a coat and a cap. They were afraid at school that he would stop going otherwise. So why not take advantage of this? He would go back to school at the beginning of September in his torn old uniform, which had been brand-new a year ago, and he knew the school would buy him a new outfit again. As his father used to say, stupid people were there simply for clever people to take advantage of. His father considered he was the

cleverest person in Chupchi although he was only a watchman at the local hospital. Whenever the head doctor, Dospayev, told him off, he would spit spitefully and mutter, "Why are you shouting? Why are you shouting?"

Salman's family was not poor. They did not have good clothes or valuable belongings in their home but, Allah be praised, as his father would say, they were not paupers. Whereas paupers had nothing to their names, the Mazitovs had money, and, what's more, a lot of money. Salman even knew where it was hidden. Their money, however, was not like everybody else's: everybody else went out and spent their money in the shops on clothes and food but the large sum of money belonging to the Mazitovs was stashed away at home. That was why Salman did not like being at home. In winter he had no other choice but in summer he did as he pleased.

The day before Salman had worked out how to get access to the local store. He was sitting on the steps outside, watching the world go by when suddenly a car drew up and suitcases were taken out of it. A little boy clambered out with a cage containing a ginger rat. When Salman caught sight of it he spat and exclaimed, "What have you brought that rat here for?" "It's not a rat, it's a hamster," the boy had replied. Then his elder sister had shouted to him, "Vitya, help me carry this suitcase!" The boy and his sister had carried the suitcase into the house, leaving the cage with Salman. Then he had raced out at top speed and said, "Hey you, come on, I've got something to show you!" and had taken him into the house and shown him the fish in the water. They were fantastic! Then they had all sat down to a meal and his dad, a colonel, had said quietly in his ear, "This is pork salami. Perhaps you don't eat pork at home? If so,

eat these lamb rissoles instead." And Salman had shaken his head and said that pork would do fine and the fatter it was the better.

Vitya's sister had stared at him and smiled. He became uneasy and began following her out of the corner of his eye, sensing that the big girl could be very dangerous for him. He did not know in what way but he could find out if he wanted to and so in the meantime he decided to keep on his guard with her.

He was sitting on the pebbly ground below Vitya's balcony and calling Vitya's name shrilly. The day before they had arranged to go gopher-hunting in the steppe. He had foolishly bragged that the lads in Chupchi made pots of money selling gopher-skins. To catch them, all they did was pour water down the holes until they were full and then waited for the gopher to rush out, dripping wet. However, it was exhausting work lugging buckets of water to and fro. Salman had never been interested in gopher-skins because, you see, they were worth two a penny.

Vitya was excitedly gulping down the rest of his tea.

"Drink it with a lot of milk, like the Kazakhs do," suggested his father, pouring cold milk into his cup. "When you go into the steppe, try not to lose sight of the cantonment your first time. And don't forget what I told you about tarantula spiders andadders."

"There should be some boa constrictors in the steppe, too."

"Well, don't you go and touch them either. Take a flask of water and a bite to eat with you."

Vitya jumped up, munching the corner of a sandwich.

"I'm off, Mum. Give me a bucket. No, I'll need two."

"Whatever for?"

"To flush gophers out with. That's the way they catch them here."

"Give him that rubbish bucket and a canister," said his father. "And a sack."

"Right," Natalia Petrovna went into the kitchen to help Vitya get ready for his outing.

The colonel followed her.

"Listen, I don't think it's a good idea to encourage Vitya's friendship with this boy," said Natalia Petrovna in a low voice. "Have you noticed how chapped his hands are? Maria Semyonovna has warned me that he comes from a very bad family."

"Rubbish!" retorted the colonel, frowning. "Absolute rubbish! What does 'a bad family' mean, for heaven's sake? If you're afraid that Vitya might be corrupted by the wrong sort of friendship, it means we've done a bad job bringing him up. Agreed?"

"Yes, of course you're right. I just wanted you to know. If he lives in bad conditions at home, we must see to it that he spends more time here with us. I'll give him some good hand cream."

Salman sensed that it was now being decided for him whether he was to be Vitya's friend or not. No, they had not consulted him to see if he wanted to be friends with their son. Well, as he'd bothered to turn up, he might as well take Vitya gopher-hunting in the steppe. In any case, he did not have anything better to do that day. And then he'd decide how he felt about Vitya.

He stayed where he was and stared sullenly at Vitya, running towards him, looking clean and well-

groomed and wearing new sneakers. And the flask attached to his belt was knocking against his knees. No, he wasn't a match for Salman! He was like Alik, beefy Alik who used to live here in the town, whose Mummy brought him wonderful pack lunches to school. Vitya was in a marvellous mood. Why couldn't he at least notice that Salman was fuming? No, he was beaming, the silly fool! And what had he got in that bucket? A sack. And what was under the sack? Something greasy wrapped in newspaper.

"Father told me to take a snack with me! If we don't eat it, we'll leave it by the gopher-holes. Here!" Vitya pulled a handful of paper-wrapped sweets out of his pocket. "Try these—they're nice. They should help quench our thirst although I read somewhere that one should eat something salty and not sweet before going out into the desert."

"Salty? Why?" Salman popped a sweet into his mouth. "Sweets are more filling..." He rolled the sweet round his tongue and wondered whether Vitya was hard to understand or just plain stupid.

You could see a long way across the steppe but the cart appeared suddenly, as if from out of the blue. Serve you right, Salman, for being so dozy!

An old man in a tattered jacket was leading a donkey. Even the laziest of horses knows it's got to keep on the right side of its master but that doesn't apply to donkeys. It is always blatantly clear from the expression on its face that it simply could not care two hoots, or two brays, should I say! The donkey in question had been dragging the heavily laden cart across the untracked steppe for a long way. It slowed down and stopped pulling when it caught sight of the

two young fools pouring water down a gopher-hole. Then it stopped and bared its teeth. The old man looked daggers at Salman and Vitya, yelled at the donkey and struck his cane across its dusty back and the cart began grinding along the unmarked track again, heading in the direction its master wanted to go.

It would not have done Salman any harm to know where this person had come from and where he was headed, for he was by no means a stranger but his own father! And he had passed by without even letting on that he had spotted his son.

Sauntering along, a fair way behind the cart was Rusty Nail, dressed in studded trousers and a loose-hanging shirt gaudily daubed with palm trees and monkeys like a playground wall in the local kindergarten.

Vitya gazed blankly at the boy's flashy shirt and bristling ginger hair which had caused Nurlan Akatov from the 8th B form to be given that nickname. Salman knew that any minute now Rusty Nail was bound to let rip at Vitya (for Rusty's tongue was as sharp as a razor). However, he had no cause to worry for Nurlan passed by as if he had not noticed them. Well, wonders certainly never ceased...

And, anyway, Vitya had his mind on other things, "Now I understand why chariots had such huge wheels: when you have to travel across unmarked countryside you need either a caterpillar track like a tank or only two wheels and the larger they are, the better... See what I mean? Practicability is increased..."

Salman did not comment on Vitya's ridiculous explanation. Practicability, my foot! Vitya hadn't a clue about anything and couldn't see beyond the end of his nose. He'd thought about the wheels but he had

not taken any notice of the persons wandering along this unmarked trail in the steppe with a cart. Where had they been? And why? They were certainly up to no good. But why had his father taken Rusty Nail into the steppe with him that day? What was he using him for? Rusty was up to his neck in debts with his father. Why, what a crafty old rascal he was! He hadn't said a word to Salman in front of Vitya. Yes, he'd been right to pass by in silence. Since the previous winter Salman had given up all dealings with his father. He was now his own master and carried on as he pleased. That was the way he liked it. And frankly, he was fed up of fooling about and playing this childish game of pouring water on a gopher. He turned the bucket upside down and sat on it.

"You rest awhile," said Vitya considerately. "And I'll press on my own."

Salman lost his temper, jumped up and kicked the bucket which rolled over and over. Then he ran after it, picked it up and trudged off to the lake for more water. No, he could not understand what Vitya was really like and what he, Salman, was doing with him.

They did, however, flush the gopher out of its hole after having already given up counting how many bucketfuls they had dragged from the lake. The water had risen to the mouth of the hole but the gopher was still trying to stick it out. Then all of a sudden it emerged looking larger and more ferocious than in real life as any man or beast tries to do in a moment of danger. Salman was amazed how nimbly Vitya threw the sack over the gopher and pushed it into the bucket. The gopher squealed furiously. Salman put his hand under the sack and brought the newspaper-wrapped packet out of the bucket.

"It's not going to eat now," said Vitya, fastening the sack more securely over the bucket.

"But we are," replied Salman, unwrapping the newspaper and grinning approvingly at the meat pies inside.

On their way back to the cantonment they passed a flock of sheep returning slowly to Chupchi. Yerkin galloped up to them with a cane in his hand. He could hear the gopher squealing in the bucket.

"Why?" he nodded towards the bucket. The question was directed at Vitya as if Salman was not even there.

Salman kept silent and twisted his lips, promising himself to get even with Yerkin.

Vitya began explaining in great detail how he was going to keep the gopher in a cage at home and study its habits.

"Why take it home? Gophers should be studied in the steppe." Yerkin spurred his horse on with his knees and rode back to his flock.

"Hey!" shouted Vitya. "Let's have a go on your horse!"

Yerkin glanced back and replied, "Horses aren't bicycles: you can't have goes on them!"

"Do you know him?" Vitya asked Salman.

"Yerkin? He works as his dad's assistant," replied Salman, scowling even more angrily. "Earns a lot of money. So does his dad. The Sadvakasovs are very well off. That's their yurt over there!"

The yurt was standing in the steppe between the cantonment and the *aul*. It was the same colour as the steppe at the end of summer.

CHAPTER THREE

Museké's eldest son, Academician Kenjegali Sadvakasov, a well-known geologist in Kazakhstan, had come to visit him from Alma-Ata. All the most respected people in the district hurried over to see their distinguished countryman. Museké slaughtered two sheep and told his womenfolk to make a traditional mutton stew. The firewood hissed under the cauldron and the boiling water babbled and the enticing aroma of cooking stew drew many relatives and neighbours.

Yerkin looked after his guests while Academician Sadvakasov sat cross-legged on the rug, using his fingers to take pieces of meat from the common bowl and describing with gusto how, as a lad, he had tended his father's flock.

Yerkin could tell his father disapproved of the conversation his eldest brother had started up. So what if he had grazed sheep? Everyone else present had, including the regional Executive Chairman, and school headmaster Kanapia Akhmetov. Of all the guests invited by his father, Stepanov was most likely the only one who had not grazed sheep in his childhood.

Encouraged by the reverential attention he was being given by all the guests, Kenjegali went on to recall how, during the war, when his father was at the front, he had stayed behind with the flock and had only a tattered sheepskin coat to cover himself with. Whenever the coat became infested with lice, he would throw it on an anthill because ants destroyed parasites of all kinds.

"Are you acquainted with this ancient fumigation method?" he asked the regional Executive Chairman sitting next to him.

"Nope!" replied the latter, laughing. "I'm too young to remember that. And I reckon even the old folks here are, too. But you, Kenjegali, have a good memory."

"Well, I certainly do..." continued Museké's son. "In winter I had to run barefooted across the snow and my feet and hands were covered with cold sores. And in this dreadful condition I had the audacity to fall in love with a young girl who came to lessons in a dress decorated with a lace collar and cuffs. She was beautiful and intelligent while I..."

"You were always top of your class," chimed in headmaster Akhmetov nicknamed the Head. Akhmetov shaved his large, spherically round head in the traditional Kazakh manner. "Our head-teacher, Seraphima Gavrilovna, remembers you and often uses you as an example to follow."

"Seraphima Gavrilovna!" Sadvakasov smiled. "She arrived in Chupchi when I was in my last year at school. She was young but terribly strict, and she really laid into me... All I could hear was: "Sadvakasov, you're not with us! Sadvakasov, you're staring at that girl again—go up to the board!"

Everybody, including Yerkin, burst out laughing: Kenjegali was giving a very amusing and life-like impersonation of Seraphima Gavrilovna who was known by everyone in Chupchi. She still enjoyed commenting in class on who looked at whom. But who was it Kenjegali used to stare at? Who was the girl in the lace-collared dress?

Guessing suddenly, Yerkin flushed. Why, Sophia Kazimirovna, Saulé's mother! Of course, it was her! The daughter of the local doctor, Kazimir Ludvigovich, whom the old folks often recalled. Of course, only the doctor's daughter could have been dressed in a lace-collared dress. So, that was

who his eldest brother had been in love with.

Yerkin remembered how Saulé's mother had once told him that he was like his eldest brother and that all his family were gifted at mathematics. Kenjegali was top of his class but that did not mean he necessarily appealed to the doctor's daughter. And it was not because she was fair-haired and green-eyed and he was a Kazakh. He simply had not appealed to her and she had married Dospayev, a western Kazakh from Astrakhan. Sophia and Dospayev had studied at the same medical institute in Moscow. However, instead of going to live at his home on the Volga, she had brought him here to Chupchi. Museké said that everybody in her family was attached to Chupchi almost more deeply than the Kazakhs themselves. Perhaps Kenjegali had appealed to her after all. He, however, had left home and chosen a profession which would never bring him back again. Mind you, Dospayev was a remarkable doctor. He was respected in the steppe as much as Sophia's father had once been...

As he carried round a towel and a bowl for the guests to wash their hands in, Yerkin noticed his eldest brother was staring inquiringly at him and he sensed that the latter had guessed what he was thinking.

Academician Sadvakasov had not been home or seen his youngest brother for a very long time. The Sadvakasovs who lived in town considered that Yerkin would finish school in Chupchi and then move to them in Alma-Ata to continue his studies or perhaps even end up in Moscow. However, the Sadvakasovs' other children, who had spent the summer with their grandfather, came back with the news that Yerkin

had decided to become a shepherd. The children insisted this was Yerkin's serious intention and not just idle talk. The Alma-Ata Sadvakasovs grew anxious. The academician's brother, Majit, who had arrived from Karaganda, where he was in charge of a coal mine, expressed his family's attitude to the rumour about Yerkin more accurately than anyone else: "Time and tide wait for no man; you've got to strike while the iron's hot." They all agreed it was time to do some serious talking to Yerkin.

Sadvakasov could not consider himself a bad son. He was Kazakh, after all, and the Kazakhs did not have bad children just as they didn't have lonely old people. He knew that his father, who had sired so many successful and well-to-do sons now living in their own comfortable apartments, would continue driving his flock across the summer pastures to the winter ones and back again until the end of his days. But who would work for his father instead of Yerkin when the latter moved to town to continue his studies? He drew up a mental list of all his relatives in the *aul* but nobody suitable sprung to mind.

...Yerkin slipped down from his father's stocky little horse and walked over to his eldest brother. A broad-shouldered herdsman on an expensive thoroughbred had ridden over with him.

"Kenjegali," Yerkin said in a respectful tone, "this is Isabek."

Isabek, who looked old enough to be a family man, was, in fact, only eighteen. He worked with his father who was a distant relative of the Sadvakasovs. Kenjegali remembered going to Chupchi many years ago and seeing by his relative's yurt a rather blank-looking little boy who could hardly say anything although he was already three. Deprived of games with children of their own age and contact with

other people, children living in shepherds' yurts tend to begin speaking later. Kenjegali stared at the broadly-built lad with growing interest as he realised he would be an ideal substitute for Yerkin.

It grew dark in the steppe and the smell of sheep grew stronger as they flocked together for the night. Museké came out of the yurt in a long sheepskin coat, sprang lightly into the saddle, spreading the folds of his coat over his horse's rump and carrying his staff as usual, rode off into the steppe.

"One of my institute friends, who's now a big knob, once visited his native *aul* and came back with his grandfather's saddle and hung it on the wall of his study along with the Finnish furniture, African masks and Czechoslovak cut-glass. Now if you ask me, that's not what following tradition is all about, it's just interior design," said Kenjegali thoughtfully as if speaking to himself and not to Yerkin, and then interrupting his thoughts, said, "You and I haven't seen each other for ages, Yerkin. You've grown up..." Although true, these words sounded empty. "How's Dad? Is he well?"

"A lump came up on his leg last spring and had to be cut out."

"Why didn't you bring him to ús' in Alma-Ata?"

"Dospayev said there was no need to bother anyone."

"Are you stubborn, too, like Dad?"

"I don't know."

"Well, and do you know what that star up there is called?"

"The Shepherd's Staff!" replied the lad defiantly. "It's also known as the North Star but the first name's more fitting because all the other stars move round in a circle while the Staff always stays in the same place with two horses attached to it."

The stars were glimmering mistily above the steppe as usual.

"Look," exclaimed Yerkin joyfully, "There's a satellitel"

Something, which looked exactly like a star except for the way it was moving, hurtled through the constellations.

"Have you been to the Baikonur space drome?"

"I know the mining town Baikonur. Before the Revolution the English were in charge there. But the space drome's just named that: it's really a long way from the old town of Baikonur and nobody allowed inside it."

"Oh..." drawled Yerkin.

"I see Father's friendly with some of the army officers stationed here."

"Colonel Stepanov drops by quite often. He's interested to know what a yurt is really like and what a shepherd's work's all about. He told Father that roads ought to be built in the steppe because they paved the way of progress."

"What other suggestions has he made?" Kenjegali sensed that Yerkin had started speaking about something that mattered to him.

"He doesn't understand why the herds have to be driven to winter pastures. In his opinion, this method is out-of-date. If enough fodder was stored to last through the winter, the shepherds wouldn't have to drive their flocks across the snow in freezing blizzards."

"And what was Father's reaction to that?" Kenjegali suddenly felt stung to the quick.

"He thanked him for his good advice but said that he did not know how we would go about following it. According to scientists, one sheep needs an average of about fifty acres of pasture per year. Some say that's

too much, others, not enough. You see, grass grows densely in one place and very patchily in another." The tone of Yerkin's voice reminded Kenjegali of his father. "A sheep wanders about munching all the grass in its way and doesn't mind whether it's thick or patchy. It's got nothing else to do all day long except munch grass. It doesn't ask for paid holidays or time off to get its teeth fixed and it doesn't need spare parts. Without even noticing any itself, it munches through about fifty acres every year. Who could match that? Who could clear fifty acres of patchy grass with a machine? And how could it be fed to the sheep in barns? That was how Father explained it to Stepanov. The colonel laughed and said that one certainly lives and learns..."

"I see you also spend a lot of time wondering what shepherds' lives are going to be like in the future," said Kenjegali cautiously.

"According to one old legend, if you wanted to remind a Kazakh of his birthplace, you simply sent him a sprig of steppe wormwood. People nowadays are getting more and more interested in old customs and their ancestors' way of life.

"All the shepherds are wondering about their future. They get together in their winter settlement and discuss things. There're a lot of young people here and we all work with our fathers. At night we get together and chat and tell each other folk-stories and legends... For instance, why mustn't you look at the moon for too long? Because if the moon manages to count all your eyelashes, you die. We sit about discussing one thing and another. If we see a satellite, we start talking about space and that's interesting, too. But, mind you, no matter how long you talk about the sky, you always come back to earth again in the end. We argue over whether the land would look more beauti-

ful if there was nothing but fields and orchards everywhere. Perhaps, you see, nature needs to be different and all the steppes, deserts and salt lakes have a role to play. The same's true of wolves, adders and tarantula spiders... And what about the saiga which lives where there're sands and salt lakes... And what about hares... In the steppe we used only to have one type of hare but now we've two... Old Kudaibergenov spotted one and couldn't believe his eyes. And now nobody even takes any notice of them. I saw one, too. They've come here from the west. Scientists reckon they move a hundred kilometres further east every year. Our steppe seems to appeal to hares."

"So you're interested in ecology, aren't you? Well, it's certainly a science with a future. You'll be the first Sadvakasov to study in a biology faculty."

Yerkin stubbornly shook his head, "I want to stay here."

"You can't be serious! Why should a person with your talent follow in his grandfather's footsteps? You and your generation must choose your own way and think of the future and not of the past and see the whole world and not just your native *aul*." Kenjegali sensed that his younger brother had totally withdrawn into his shell.

"Please tell me why you're saying all this?" Yerkin asked sadly. "Why is it if you say you're going to be a shepherd, people think you're going back into the past and returning to poverty and illiteracy or, on the contrary, start praising you to the skies as if you were already a hero by accomplishing amazing feats such as leading your flock out of snowstorms and the like?"

"I don't understand you. What is it you want?"

"I want a good life."

"A good life?"

"Yes, for myself and for Isabek and for everybody. I want to live well!" repeated Yerkin. "And I'll also tell you what I don't want. Look, you talked to Isabek and most likely decided that he was very dim-witted. But do you really not know why he's like that? His girl friend pokes fun of him, you know, and calls him a thickie and says she's bored with him. You know the girl I mean: I saw you watching her today. Aminá's from here, too, but Isabek's not good enough for her any more although he's considered our top sportsman and his herd has always been the best..." Yerkin paused and then said sharply, "I don't want to live in a traditional old yurt, no matter how beautifully it's made. I don't want to live all on my own."

"I don't understand you! What is it you want?"

"I want to live in Chupchi. I want our steppe to be filled with people and light and warmth so that everybody has a good life."

"And how do you intend going about it?" his brother asked seriously.

"Well, this is what I've been thinking..." Yerkin hesitated. "Only don't laugh. The saigas in the steppe here aren't tended by shepherds. It was thought once that they were dying out and would soon be extinct but, after being put under protection, they began breeding like mad and now their numbers have to be kept down. So this is what I was thinking... People could get the sheep used to living untended in the steppe again. They used to manage all right before they became dependent on man. Once upon a time people had no other tools but sticks. Therefore they became shepherds. I read somewhere that in some parts of Australia the sheep are tended by robots.

But why improve the same old stick with the help of new technology? People should give some of their domestic animals back their freedom and learn to take all the meat and wool they need directly from the steppe."

"From the steppe? And what will the steppe get from you? Have you thought about that?"

"We'll improve the pastures, plant lots of suitable trees and create oases. There'll be a lot of wells and new lakes..."

"Do you read a lot of science fiction?"

"I've already been asked that!" retorted Yerkin annoyedly.

Kenjegali shrugged his shoulders, "I'd still call this nostalgia for the past although it's on a more, I would say, contemporary level. Think that over! Remember how many centuries man has domesticated animals for! And now he wants to show them the door and go hurtling back into the distant past at a terrifying speed to rejoin his Neanderthal forebears?"

As he spoke, he was overcome with shame. After all, he, a well-known academician, was wrangling with a young lad!

"I'm sorry, Yerkin. I didn't mean to hurt you but the age of great athletes and warriors is over. We are now living in the age of science. And everything you and your friends think about when you can't sleep at night, is being studied by many scientists. For example, how man can keep his natural links with the environment and look after the environment..."

He was saying the wrong things to his younger brother, and doing so in the wrong way. He thought about his own wild and hungry youth and how he had come to appreciate it and recall it more and more frequently over the years. Museké's elder children

had stubbornly broken away from the irksome old bonds, chaining them to monotonous *aul* life and resolutely forced their way upwards. And now Yerkin with equal determination was struggling in the opposite direction. His father was not persuading him to become a shepherd: he wanted to himself. And by going in the opposite direction, he became closer to Kenjegali than the latter's own children. There was no doubt about it, they had been spoiled terribly in their town home whereas he and Yerkin had grown up in a shepherd's yurt!

"I'm glad you've confided your future plans to me," said Kenjegali. "But if you want them to come true, you'd better become a biologist or a party worker and not a shepherd. What can a shepherd do to change a sheep's instinct?"

"All that he can," replied Yerkin reluctantly. "And what he can't do, he won't. Makes no difference whether he's a shepherd or a scientist."

Kenjegali snorted condescendingly: he was, after all, still just a young lad and reasoned like one.

The vibrant sounds of trumpets could be heard somewhere. At first, Kenjegali could not understand what it was. Then he looked up and saw that the entire Milky Way (Bird Way in Kazakh) was ablaze with light. Trumpets were sounding above in the Bird Way: it was autumn and the cranes were leaving for foreign climes.

He realised he had been away from Chupchi, his home, for too long but even his father, who worked like a horse, had never had such terribly exhausting years of work as his eldest son, who was the most successful of all the Sadvakasovs. And he was determined to take his younger brother away from Chupchi, not simply so that he could enjoy an easy life in town with all the mod cons such as running

water and gas-heat, instead of having to light fires with manure briquets or saxaul wood. Yerkin would be facing more strenuous work than what they had been doing here in the steppe for hundreds of years and he would definitely cope with the overload of brainwork expected of him. He did not realise yet that it was possible to enjoy strenuous brainwork just as much as hard physical labour. That was what he would have to speak to him about, thereby appealing to his self-esteem and family pride and stubbornness. He would soon be fifteen when he would come of age, as far as Kazakh traditions were concerned. Kenjegali compared him to his own children: in towns fifteen was considered a difficult age.

The time had come to change the subject and return to Yerkin's future plans at a later date and then keep on at him until he saw the light!

"You probably want to go to sleep?"

"No, I enjoy sitting up like this at night, thinking and talking. My friends and I often sit up all night."

"All Kazakhs are night-birds. It's in our blood. Listen, Yerkin," Kenjegali began laughing quietly, "at night you and your friends don't just discuss the future, do you? You also think about girls, don't you! Oh, I remember! Town boys lose their heads in spring: whereas village boys' blood runs high in summer. Your generation hasn't forgotten how to play *ak-suek**, has it?"

"No, we still play sometimes but we prefer football."

"My, you're odd! Football's a game. *Ak-suek* gives

* *Ak-suek* — Kazakh national game (Lit.: white bone).—
Ed.

you worldly wisdom. Some people are interested in finding *ak-suek*, others in finding a girl. I wish I were your age now..." Kenjegali paused, remembering something. "Listen, Yerkin, you know Sophia Kazimirovna, don't you? She must have a daughter of roughly your age. What's her name?"

"Saulé."

"My..." he said in surprise. "Why wasn't she given a Russian name?"

"I don't know," said Yerkin, "is Saulé such a bad name?"

"No, it's a fine one but the doctors in our hospital have given their children Christian names for the past hundred years. Chupchi's got used to this. Tell me, Yerkin, is she beautiful?"

"Yes, she is," replied Yerkin earnestly.

"More beautiful than anyone else in the village?"

Yerkin did not reply at once.

"One's first love matters a lot in one's life." Kenjegali again seemed to be speaking to himself. "The person one first loves affects you for the rest of your life. Believe me! I know that for a fact. You soar upwards after her and it's a marvellous feeling! However, you're still too young. Some day you'll know what I mean... I'm going off to sleep. I go to bed early and get up early, you know. More like a European than a Kazakh..." He went inside the yurt.

Yerkin heard him pour water into a glass, take some sleeping pills and make himself comfortable on the rug. Then he turned over, got up and came out again.

"You're wrong to think that we left everything behind us unchanged when we left Chupchi, Yerkin. By leaving, we also changed life here in the steppe.

Electricity, the radio—everything new that has appeared in Chupchi is part of the general changes taking place all over the country and in our republic, Kazakhstan. And we, too, took a hand in these changes when we left the *auls*.”

“I realise that,” said Yerkin. “But Father likes this joke: if you show various good traditions of another people to a Kazakh living in a very remote village, he’ll switch over to them at once; but if a Kazakh goes off to live in a town, he’s afraid he’ll lose his identity there and so takes all his village customs with him.”

CHAPTER FOUR

One weekend all the Stepanovs, Major Korotun and his wife, Maria Semyonovna, and Ryabov drove in two cars over to the Salty Lakes one hundred kilometres away.

Stocky, ruddy-cheeked Major Korotun, took longer packing to go fishing than any of the others. All his colleagues called him simply “Korotun” and so did his wife: “Korotun, for heaven’s sake, how much longer will we have to wait for you?”

When they arrived at the lakes, Korotun bustled about getting a bonfire ready. He had brought some saxaul branches with him but instead of being brittle old snags, they were smooth, young, strong and branchy like deer’s antlers. He put on a pair of thick gloves, seized hold of the branches, energetically swung them round and grimacing fiercely, smashed them against a stone. The thickest branch cracked half-way along and he broke it in two with his foot.

Ryabov and Vitya had unloaded the tackle and were working something out from book entitled *Fishing Made Simple* which they were holding open in front of them.

"Why are you sitting still, Masha?" asked her mother. "You weren't sitting in a draught in the car, were you? I told you to wind the window up, you know."

Masha got up and went over to Vitya and Ryabov. As usual their father had already vanished with his old bamboo rods.

"Which float shall I put on for you, Masha?" Vitya asked. "The red one or the green one?"

"Red's easier to spot," said Ryabov, tying on a goose feather which was white at the bottom and red at the top.

Natalia Petrovna and Maria Semyonovna stayed behind with Korotun by the cars and tents to get things organised. One of the ideas of the fishing trip was to give the women a chance to get better acquainted.

Natalia Petrovna took the canister of water out of the car and at once found something to talk about.

"I remember how we lived in Musab... A soldier would drive a water-cart over to our neighbourhood: and each household would take two buckets. We were allocated a tub of water once a month and then we'd do all our washing and shrub the children and have a whale of a time!"

"We were sent to Yakutsk as soon as the war was over," in the same tone replied Maria Semyonovna, who had been a nurse at the front. "If you felt like a cup of tea, you just stuffed some snow into a pot and stuck it on the primus. And as for the milk I used to

buy at market! It was frozen and sold in flat round pieces..."

"One year you simply could not buy eggs anywhere in the Chukotka Peninsula," recalled Natalia Petrovna. "Children had even forgotten they ever existed. When they finally appeared again, I bought eight dozen and back at home Masha asked me, 'Mum, why aren't these balls round?'"

"Now, they say, you can buy oranges all year round there."

"Nowadays things everywhere are infinitely better than before. There're now flats with all the mod cons but my husband and I lived in prefabs when we were first married. And that was by no means all!" Natalia Petrovna looked triumphantly. "There's nothing we haven't been through! My daughter, you know, was born on the Moscow-Khabarovsk express!"

"On a train? Masha?!" exclaimed Maria Semyonovna in incredulous horror.

"My husband thought I'd be on my own but, would you believe it, two of us got off to greet him!"

"Gracious me!" Maria Semyonovna gave a deep sigh. "I can imagine what it's like travelling from one cantonment to another with small children. Korotun and I have never had children. So there's just the two of us." An expression of long-suffering pain ran across her round face. "Your Masha's already quite grown-up. What form is she in?"

"The eighth form."

"Does she study well?"

"Not especially," admitted Natalia Petrovna. "She doesn't do badly, but with her intelligence she should get nothing but top marks. But what can you do when nearly every two years they start at a new school? Lord, if only we had a grandmother I'd have left them

with her all through school and they would have grown up and studied like normal children. You simply cannot imagine how I envy families with grandmothers. You see, I grew up in an orphanage. My father was killed at the front and my mother in a bombing raid when we were being evacuated from very near the border. My husband's parents were also killed during the war. Both his mother and father were teachers and the Germans shot them for their ties with the partisans. Kolya was stood beside them but was only wounded by two bullets and not killed, and then buried alive. Luckily for him, our soldiers recaptured the village and an officer dragged him out alive from among the dead in the pit. As we both grew up without parents, we're now raising our children without any experience of parental care. It's very hard when there are no grandparents in a family."

"Yes, I can see that," said Maria Semyonovna sympathetically.

They both realised they were still finding out facts about one another rather than having a heart-to-heart talk. However, one thing was already certain: they could become closer friends. What's more, they had to, for otherwise their life in the cantonment would be unbearable.

Ryabov and Vitya at last managed to fix the rods for themselves and for Masha and decided to start fishing in some clear little creeks glinting amidst the thick reeds. Nearby something squelched and champed in a thicket of rusty-coloured stems. Ryabov kept adjusting his glasses as they slipped down his perspiring nose. He began telling Vitya in a whisper how quite recently, only one hundred years ago, to be precise, the famous traveller Semyonov-Tien-Shansky passed closely to this place with his caravan

and the Cossacks in his escort used their swords to spike the large fish swarming in the reeds.

Ryabov had been dressed in a dark-blue running-suit and a wide-brimmed panama hat with little perforated holes in it but he had already given the hat away to Vitya as a present and was now having great difficulty keeping Vitya's small cap with its plastic peak on his head.

Neither Vitya nor Ryabov caught anything. So much for fishing made simple! Yes, Ryabov and Vitya certainly knew a lot about fish and all their cunning habits, Masha thought to her sarcastically. There was simply no point staying with them.

She wound in her line and walked along the shore. From a low hillock she looked down upon all three lakes which were enclosed by narrow flat shores. In the parts clear of reeds along the shore something like sea foam gleamed white but this was in fact salt and not sea foam. The seas are also salty but their shores are not covered by a tough white crust of salt because the water in them is always in motion. Masha remembered the breakers on the Black Sea and the Pacific Ocean and how, when you looked down from a plane, the shore seemed to be covered in white lace.

Masha also recalled how she had left the Chukotka Peninsula and arrived at the old town on the Volga.

She had walked along the embankment reading the plaques on houses which said something like: 17th century architectural monument under state protection. Ordinary tenants lived in some of these houses. Masha had come from a town in which even the oldest building was only ten years old. She got carried away looking round and was late for school.

"Tundra nature" was written on the blackboard in the classroom. Also on display were some pictures of deer similar to cows, greasing in a dreary landscape. Masha turned away from the pictures which had obviously been drawn by an artist who had never been in the Arctic regions, and began gazing out of the window at the golden domes and their crosses drifting towards clouds in the deep blue sky.

"Stepanova!" called someone from somewhere far away it seemed. "Yes, you, the new girl, I mean you!" The geography teacher walked nearer to her and asked, "Aren't you interested in what I'm speaking about?"

The correct answer would have been, "Why, yes, I am." But then you would be taken at your word and asked to repeat what had been said. And you would be left speechless and ever after be considered foolish by the whole class. She had no option and suddenly feeling totally calm, replied, "No, I'm not."

"I see!" The teacher sat down in surprise.

"We left the Chukotka Peninsula only a week ago." Masha explained politely, "I saw the tundra every day and it's not like that."

The delighted class howled with laughter. During the break Masha was plied with questions about polar bears. Later her father gave her a dressing-down for supposedly trying to win popularity in an unfair way.

So much for being popular! She was now thousands of kilometres away from there and there was even three hours difference in the time. There were no historical monuments here in Chupchi except, perhaps, for the ancient land itself.

Some rib-like stones were jutting out of the ground on the hillock where Masha was standing. These stones appeared above ground whenever holes were worn in the steppe's sparsely-covered surface. Lizards were darting mischievously on their crooked little legs along the stones which crumbled instantly into little charred flakes as if they had been burnt in a fire.

Masha looked all round, scanning the entire shore, and could only just make out the solitary fisherman with a water-proof cape slung over his shoulders. So that was where her father had got to! She ran towards him.

Her father was sitting very still with his right leg tucked under him, his left leg out in front and his elbow on his knee. This was a new sitting position for him: he usually found a stone to sit on. And there was something new, too, about his face: his eyebrows were lighter, his eyes had grown narrower, his tanned skin was tensely stretched across his jowls and the wrinkles around his eyes were white.

At the sound of steps and crunching of rushes and weeds, he called out without looking round,

"Well done for deciding to find me. A shoal of sazans has swum up here. Look how they're biting! We'll start catching them any moment now."

Masha sat down next to him on the edge of the cape, which had once been a brighter shade of green. She vividly remembered it in a woodland glade. It was good to hide under. Now it had turned russet-brown to tone in with everything around. Everything, that is, except the shiny green tin with a picture of corn cobs on its label, which was standing on the pebbles.

The fishes seemed to have been simply waiting for Masha to appear.

"Got you!" exclaimed her father leaning forwards, and pulling the short, round-bellied little fish out of the murky water. He jerked the hook out of the fish's pouting lips and threw it to Masha. "Not bad! About three hundred grammes' worth!"

The round-bellied little sazan which had a black stripe running along its backbone, flapped about on the hot pebbles.

"Let's put it in the bucket!"

A bucket of clayey lake water was standing nearby. Masha heard a splash and then loud tapping as the fish hit the sides of the tin bucket.

"Got you!" Her father brought in another sazan and lowered it into the bucket. "I told you there was a lot of them here. They're all the same... Let's have a look at your gear. Your hook's fine. Move your float up a bit. Here you've got to fish at a depth of about one and a half metres."

Masha put her hand inside the tin, popped a piece of corn into her mouth, slipped another onto her hook and cast her float near her father's, which looked like a soap bubble.

Sitting next to him, she could sense how blissfully happy he was now that he knew his fisherman's luck had not left him. Yes, it followed him everywhere he went, by plane, train, car or on foot, to the Pacific, the Volga and now here it was again on time at the Salty Lakes.

Masha, on the other hand, did not get so much as a bite!

"Come on, let's swap rods," said her father, handing her his rod with the soap-bubble float and taking Masha's with the goose feather.

A minute had not gone by before the red tip of the feather dived under.

"Got you! Here's another!"

Fisherman's luck is impossible to understand. Two people can be sitting next to each other, using the same bait and casting at the same depth but one will catch fish and the other simply won't. And there's nothing you can do about it. You can exchange rods or even caps, for that matter, as it does not make the slightest difference. One will go on catching them while the other will get nothing out of it but a stiff back.

Masha sat next to her father on the low bank by the murky salt lake and felt terribly envious of her father's simple good luck.

"Don't lose heart!" her father said benevolently. "You'll begin to catch them too... Got you! Here's another!.. Believe me, don't lose heart. We'll spend the whole day here tomorrow, too. The mornings are the best time here. I'll wake you up nice and early..."

"And tomorrow, too..." At that moment a bubble which had been drifting idly on the surface, tremored and dispersed. "You're always lucky out fishing wherever you go. Simply everywhere. But I'm just so useless."

"Well, what a surprise!" He looked at Masha and realised she was not crying because she had not caught any fish. "I know you have a hard time, Masha. Don't you think that Mum and I are so dense we don't understand how hard it is for you and Vitya to keep changing schools and friends."

"Mmm..." agreed Masha. "Other people lose friends after a row. I don't row with anyone, I just go away. We'll be leaving here, too, won't we?"

"We'll have to sooner or later..." Her father began speaking firmly, "We'll keep on travelling from one

place to another until I retire but by that time you'll have grown up and have a family of your own. And so will Vitya. And Mum and I will go to some town in Central Russia and settle down there for good."

"Dad, please..." she asked. "I'm sorry. It's true, what I said: I'm useless... You see, I go about everything in the wrong way somehow. For instance, for the past two years I've gone in for figure-skating, rowing and swimming and won prizes at town competitions and thought that all this success was the result of various inner qualities of mine or something or other... I thought: Masha Stepanova's a champion and a star! And all in all, somebody special who's really trendy. But now I see that I'm not special at all and that all my inner qualities and talent for being trendy are very superficial and not worth a job outside the skating-rink and the swimming-pool. What it means is that I was only wanting to show off. Now, Vitya's got biology and takes it with him wherever he goes because he cares about it deeply and not just superficially."

"Yes, that's true."

"But all my sporting successes may look impressive and glamorous but they're completely superficial and as brittle as a shell. And what's inside? Nothing, I'm afraid. How can I be interesting and useful to others when there isn't a skating-rink where I can show how marvellously I spin round like a top, or a swimming-pool where I can show off my brilliant style?"

"You're very hard on yourself. But would you say you were really worried about this deep-down or simply anxious about the image you put across?"

He jerked sharply on his rod but too late, for the sazan flew out of the water and then flopped down again near the bank.

"That one got away!"

He dipped his fingers into the tin of sweet corn and picked out a slippery grain. Although his fingers were stubby and his nails coarse, they were very nimble and he attached the grain to the hook very quickly.

"I've got something to warn you about, you know," he said, casting his rod. "Chupchi's a small *aul*. A lot of shepherds' children board at the school's boarding-house. They've never been anywhere else and know nothing except for the steppe. I wouldn't like my daughter to think she was better and cleverer than all the others simply because the others have always lived in the steppe while she has been all over the country and flown in planes and travelled by an ocean liner and..."

"...been on holiday in the Crimea and the Caucasus. You're afraid I'll start being cheeky again? Like I was about the tundra? No, I'm not little any more."

"Right. That's a deal, isn't it?"

"Yes, but there's something else I'd like to talk to you about, Dad. Don't you ever feel like going to Bryansk?"

"I haven't given it any thought for some reason. After all, I haven't got anyone left there. You know that."

"But as Bryansk's your home town, it's ours, too. Let's go and visit Bryansk. You'll get a holiday next year and we'll be able to go then."

"Well..." he said slowly. "Maybe we will but I don't promise anything for sure. This year we were going to go to the Carpathian mountains and look what happened..."

"Yes," agreed Masha. "You never can tell —"

Water was splashing in the bucket and the fish

were tapping against the tin sides of the bucket but Masha had not caught a single one.

But she probably wasn't the only person in the world who was so unlucky. Take Korotun, for instance. He was probably never lucky out fishing and so didn't even try his hand at it any more. He was simply deceiving his bad luck by chopping firewood and lighting a fire. Bad luck was nearby but could not find a way to get nearer a person so well-organised and hard-working.

"What are you thinking about?" her father asked gently.

"About how Korotun who's older than you and already bald, is working for us all while we loaf about fishing."

"My dear Masha..." Her father shook his head. "If you want to know, our major is really in his element when it comes to bonfires and cooking outdoors. He once told me that he was the eleventh child in his family and complained that all he's got to look after now is Maria Semyonovna and himself. You can't understand this yet, though. There's still a great deal in life that you can't understand yet. When we were children, we knew less than your generation but understood more..."

He said something else but Masha seemed to go deaf. Someone cautious and sly out there in the murky water was trying to nibble off the grain of corn. Now it pulled, now let go; now it touched the grain, now would slip sideways. All her concentration was on the float: if only she could keep her wits about her and not let it slip away! She stood stock-still, waited and then tugged at the rod.

Had it got away?

Something heavy kept pulling at the line. She

pulled with all her might, the rod bent and pulled in a sazan. It managed to slip off the hook when it was already above the bank. With trembling hands Masha picked it up, alive and slippery, from the pebbles.

"Fantastic!" cried her father. "You were in a bit too much of a hurry!"

"That makes it nine with mine! Nine with mine, Dad!"

"In the Kazakh counting system, that's a whole number. Museké explained to me that nine signifies the completeness of a punishment or a gift. And forty-one is a special number for the Kazakhs, too. When they tell someone's fortune with *kumalaks*, they use forty-one of them."

"And what's a *kumalak*?" Masha asked rather absent-mindedly as she put another piece of corn on her hook.

"In Kazakh it's a kind of bead or pellet. Their fortune-tellers, who used to be known as *kumalakchi*, would scatter forty-one beads in three rows and see in what combinations of numbers they fell. It was like a game of odd and even numbers. By the way, for some unknown reason odd numbers are supposed to be lucky. Russian peasant women, you know, often put an odd number of eggs under their hens."

"Did he tell your fortune?"

"No!" Father replied laughing. "I didn't ask him to and anyway he probably doesn't know how to. Why should he?" He scooped up some pebbles by his feet and picked out the five roundest. "You know, before I started at school, we used to play jacks with pebbles on our wide, wooden steps in the yard. We'd play with five pebbles at a time, tossing them in the air and trying to catch them. We'd start off with

one and go up to five, or, on the contrary, start with five and go down to one. It looks as if I've forgotten the rules, doesn't it, Masha, and they were ever so simple, you know, but I've still forgotten them." He tossed the largest pebble in the air while his fingers agilely scooped up the rest from the ground and then burst out laughing, for he felt pleased with himself, "You see, my head might have forgotten but my hand hasn't! Yes, it's remembered, alright! Hands have a good memory." He tossed up the pebbles, caught them and quickly threw them away as he pulled another sazan out of the water. So, he might have been chatting and playing jacks but he still had been on the look-out and not missed a catch.

He cast his line again and sat down with one leg tucked under him in the Kazakh fashion.

"It is up to you and you alone to shape your life."

"You mean, one's got to have a plan?"

"You think that as life changes, plans must do, too? Well, I believe in the main plan you make when you're young."

"And it stays exactly the same the rest of your life?"

"Listen to what a polar pilot once told me. Oh, yes, I forgot, you know Voskoboinikov."

"Who lifted you and Captain Kovalenko off the ice floe?"

"Yes, Vanya Voskoboinikov. It was he who once told me that when a long-distance flight in the Arctic region is being organised, a detailed plan is drawn up beforehand but during the flight itself various new ideas often come to mind which seem more expedient. So, do you think it would be better to deviate from

the plan and follow the ideas which have sprung to mind on board?"

"Well, of course."

"No, you're wrong. Voskoboinikov explained that a new idea may be self-deceptive and a way of making one's task simpler. It may spoil the plan which was devised earlier. No, Masha, in such instances one must act according to the plan which has been tested countless times in ordinary circumstances."

"But what if there's an accident?"

"The possibility of an accident happening is usually considered beforehand or action is taken according to the given situation, keeping in mind the main task. That's what counts most. And the same is true in people's lives."

"And what sort of plan would you advise me to make, Dad?"

"Now you've asked me... I'm not going to hand over a ready-made plan either to you or Vitya. It's up to you to decide for yourselves but I should very much like it if you both tried to be useful to others and did not live only for yourselves."

"Why, I thought you were going to say something really different!" drawled Masha disappointedly.

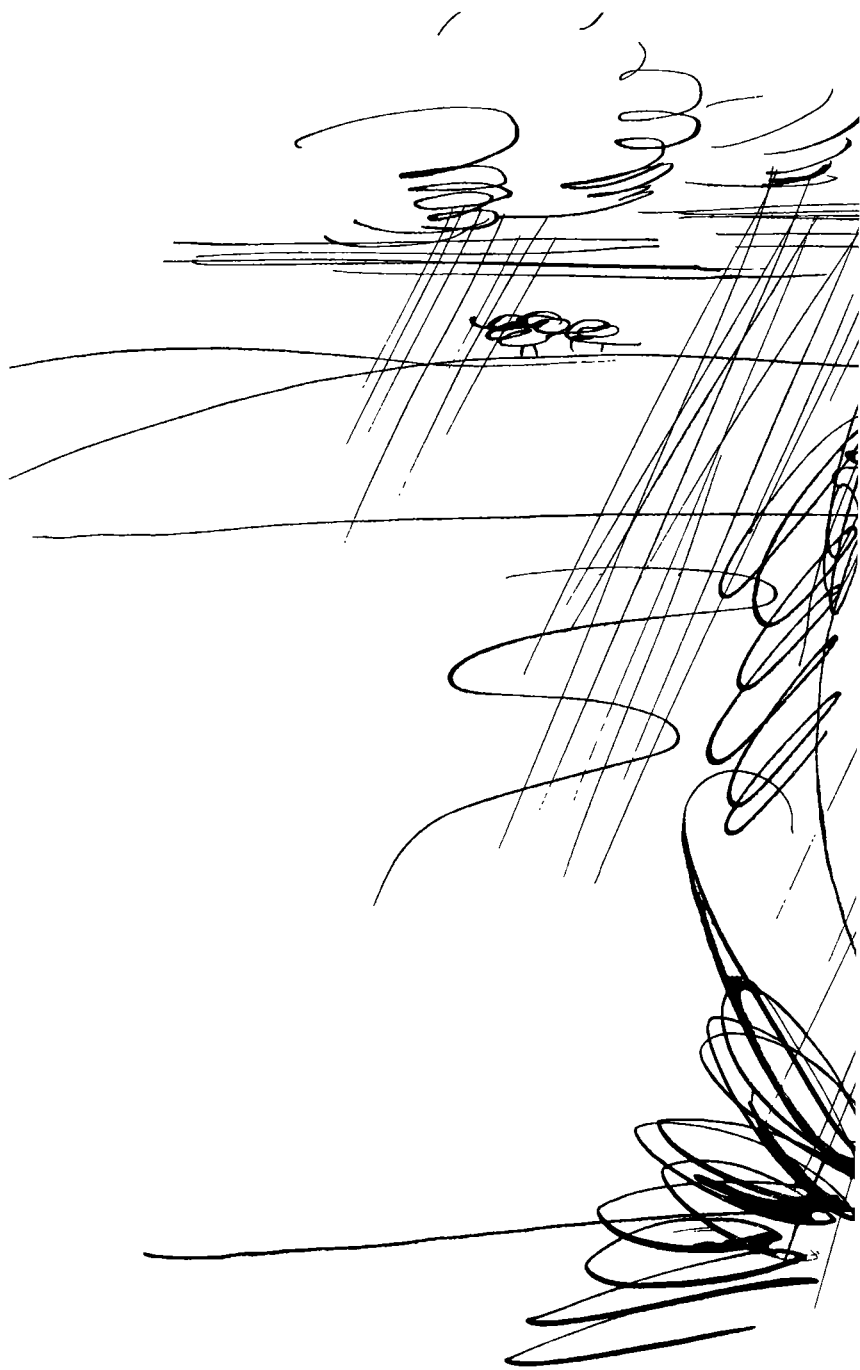
"Your father's idea of the truth is too simple? My dear Masha, what is known as common sense may seem plain and simple but each and everyone of us still has to strive towards it in whatever way he thinks best and, believe me, that's very hard..."

Masha's luck improved towards evening and she landed three more sazas. You don't need much to be completely happy, do you?!

"Let's go swimming while it's still light," said her father, putting their rods together. "It gets dark earlier here than up north, don't forget. Night will be here before you know it."

Masha spotted the familiar bluish scar on his chest. On beaches he was always asked if he had fought in the war and he always replied that he had not, although his scar had been made by a nazi bullet. By the end of his holiday the scar was particularly noticeable on his dark-tanned chest. However, only his face and hands were tanned now because he had not been on holiday that year. Although there was more than enough sun in Chupchi, he was always working indoors and never had time to sunbathe.

It was already dark when they reached the tents. They cooked the fishes, and then sat around the bonfire eating tasty fish soup.



AUTUMN



CHAPTER ONE

A woman in a plain dark-blue suit was standing on the school porch. Her hair was scraped back sharply off her prominent forehead: people with foreheads like hers never forgave or forgot anything.

You could travel wherever you liked but sooner or later you would end up at school on the first day of term and be confronted by a similar stern-looking woman in a dark-blue suit.

Head-teachers are always the same but headmasters sometimes differ.

Next to her stood a tall, heavily-built man with a huge globe-shaped head. He had close-cropped, black- and white-streaked hair and a flat face lined with deep incisions like a wind-blown boulder in the steppe. He glanced at Masha and then Vitya and the incisions stretched across his cheeks and the folds rose on his brow: he was obviously thinking something to himself about these two new pupils who had turned up on the first morning of term in the school-yard which was enclosed by a low clay wall cutting a long rectangle away from the desert. In the steppe there were naturally flat and stony plots of land which made ideal playgrounds.

There was nobody to ask who this huge-headed man was but as he was standing next to the head-teacher in the headmaster's usual place, that, of course, was who he must be.

"Masha Stepanova to the eighth B form," boomed the head-teacher in a rich female bass. "Stepanov, Vitya, to the fifth B form."

As she walked away, Masha glanced at the headmaster's broad face and a deep-set, crafty eye winked at her as if asking whether she had cold feet.

Yes, I have! she thought angrily to herself. Back to square one once again! She put her hand on Vitya's shoulder and felt how amazingly calm he was. Salman sidled up to them through the noisy jostling crowd of schoolchildren. He had not cut his hair or dressed smartly to mark the first day of term and his only token gesture had been to sew a few odd buttons onto his ragged school blazer.

"Where's your satchel?" asked Vitya.

"I'll get one here," smirked Salman. "And books, notepads, the lot... They've got everything here at school. What form are you in?"

"The fifth B. And you?"

"The same. We've got Vasya."

"Let's sit together, then!" said Vitya cheerfully. He did not ask who Vasya was.

"All right," said Salman, spitting casually. "Vasya'll tell you to go and sit in the free desk next to Mazitov. Got it? Don't ask yourself. Do as he says."

"But what if he doesn't say anything?"

"Don't worry, he will," promised Salman confidently. "There's a vacant place next to me, Vasya'll tell you that."

And again Vitya did not ask what Vasya was like or want to know anything else about him. Life had not treated him too badly and that was why he was carefree and happy-go-lucky. You see, he had rolled up for school that day without knowing that it was customary for a new pupil from the cantonment to get it in the neck from the rest of the class on the first day so that he did not think too much of himself. The new pupils from the cantonment were always tested to see how tough they were. Salman looked at Vitya's fair forelock and delicate clean hands and thought condescendingly, "All right, if you sit next

to Mazitov, you'll get off lightly, I promise you that!" And then he turned and stared hard at Masha wondering if she knew what she was in for.

Salman had never been one for idle thoughts but he suddenly caught himself wondering what it would be like if Vitya's sister, and not Vitya, were in his form. He decided it was a good idea to keep her at a distance as she could certainly do him harm.

Masha was in no hurry. As in any school, the long corridor reeked of wet oil paint. On the sparkling white walls hung a display of posters and collages, which at first glance seemed to be in Russian but not entirely. But when you saw "Kosh keldiniz" on the left side of the red calico and "Welcome" on the right, you could guess something. Their father had explained to them that lessons were taught in Kazakh in all the A forms and in Russian in all the B ones. Some Kazakh children, however, studied in the Russian forms. There were also Kazakh language classes but these were not compulsory for the servicemen's children who had joined the school after the first form. The colonel had advised them, though, to attend these classes because there was no such thing as too much knowledge.

Masha walked along the long corridor, making a mental note of the whereabouts of the staff room, the club room, the bursary and the physics laboratory. Experience had taught her that the first thing a new pupil had to do was to study the school's geography.

"I can see you're not eager to start!" Masha felt a heavy and powerful hand gripping her shoulder and caught sight of a dark-blue jacket sleeve. "Come with me. I take the first lesson in your class." The head-teacher stared piercingly at her with her slightly blood-shot, light-coloured eyes which seemed to have been bleached by the sun. "Do you like our school?"

"Yes." How many times had she lied in reply to a question of this kind!

"Morning, Seraphima Gavrilovna!" hollowed a ginger-haired boy, catching them up and disappearing through a door. Vitya might have recognised Rusty Nail, the boy whom Salman and he had seen lingering behind the old man's cart.

Once inside the classroom, the head-teacher pushed Masha towards the "execution place" between the door and the black-board,

"With me here is our new pupil. Her name is Masha Stepanova and she comes from a very long way away..." "...and she lives at the cantonment!" exclaimed a girl, jumping up from the first desk in the right row. What's that she's got on her face? Freckles? No, tiny little black moles.

"Masha is an officer's daughter and lives at the cantonment," confirmed Seraphima Gavrilovna.

"In Alik's old flat!" added the know-all with flushed cheeks.

"Faridá... When your elders are speaking..."

"...you should always keep quiet!" whined the ginger-haired boy sitting behind Faridá in the sickly voice of a goody-goody.

He had ginger hair and blue eyes but prominent cheek bones. Was he a Kazakh? Next to him was a boy with a thick black mane hiding half his face but huge saucer-shaped eyes, to make up for it, and a turned-up nose. He just had to be Russian!

In the third desk sat a girl with short hair and a thick shiny fringe running along the tops of her narrow brows which slanted upwards like arrows. Masha wondered where this very sophisticated girl was from and why she was sitting alone, and hoped she might be told to sit next to her.

Seraphima Gavrilovna seemed to guess her thoughts. "Saulé, is the place next to you vacant?"

"No, no, it isn't!" she replied in a flustered voice. "Sholpan sits next to me."

"But where is she?"

"She's on her way."

"Why's she late? That's unlike Baijanova. Saulé, you don't know what could have happened to her?"

"No, I don't."

"They're busy getting the dowry ready! Sholpan's mother hasn't let her come to school. Sholpan's sister's getting married!" It gave Faridá great pleasure to spread news.

"Faridá always knows everything," remarked Seraphima Gavrilovna annoyedly.

Sholpan's elder sister had also gone to this school but her parents had taken her away after the sixth form. People following the old Kazakh traditions for some reason considered that girls had studied enough by the sixth form. Sholpan, however, was fortunate enough to have been allowed to stay on. Seraphima Gavrilovna knew that as she had not been taken away after the sixth form, it meant the girl had already got somewhere and had stood by her rights. However, one could never tell for sure.

Everyone in the class guessed why the head-teacher was frowning. Everyone, that is, except for the new girl.

"Oh, you've made us forget what we were doing," Seraphima Gavrilovna said to Faridá. "Where shall we put the new girl?"

"Next to me!" cried the boy with ginger hair and blue eyes.

"Do be quiet, Akatov! Kudaibergenov's already sitting next to you."

"I'll chuck him out right now!" he exclaimed

seizing hold of his neighbour but the latter dodged and he tumbled onto the floor. "Oh, that's how it is!"

The boys and girls in three rows of desks were having a whale of a time and Masha realised she had to act decisively.

"If you don't mind I'll sit at that desk in the back row. It's empty, isn't it?"

"Well done!" said Seraphima Gavrilovna approvingly. "You've decided for yourself. Sit down."

Masha walked past Saulé Dospayeva, who had naughtily lowered her eyes, and ginger-haired Nurlan, grinning broadly, and sat down at the empty desk.

"Well, class," said Seraphima Gavrilovna and began giving them a good scolding, "I'm not impressed by the way you've got ready for the new school year. I can see you're not in the mood for work. Not all of you have even turned up for the beginning of classes. We'll presume that Baijanova has family matters to attend to but where's Sadvakasov?"

"There he is," calmly reported Kudaibergenov, pointing out the window.

Everyone turned round to look.

"He's really going at it!"

From the back row Masha could see through the three windows the totally flat steppe, which looked shabby and bare at the beginning of autumn, and someone running in a dark-blue school uniform and cap. Even beautiful Saulé looked at the runner and smiled shyly.

"Yerkin's got a stop-watch!" Faridá announced to the class. "He ordered it from the local store. It's a special watch. When you press a button, the second-hand stops."

"You mean, he's running along thinking that

time's stopped?" joked Nurlan Akatov. "That as long as he keeps running, lessons won't start?"

"He's training," explained Kudaibergenov. "He's put a stone every hundred metres on the way to the school from his winter hut. All in all, there are fifty-three stones. That's five thousand three hundred metres."

"Is he going to run all year?" asked someone in surprise. "In winter, too? Have you asked Vasya?"

"Who on earth is Vasya?" asked Seraphima Gavrilovna angrily.

"We borrowed a tape-measure from Vassily Petrovich when we were marking the way, and he showed Yerkin how to feel his pulse," Kudaibergenov explained to the class.

He seems very pleasant, Masha thought. He looks Russian but his surname doesn't sound like it.

"When will you stop this disgraceful behaviour!" fumed Seraphima Gavrilovna. "It's time you behaved like adults! You're in the eighth form, after all!"

"Will we be allowed into the community centre in the evenings?" whined Akatov. Masha had already sized him up for there had been jokers in all her other classes.

The exhausted runner appeared in the open doorway.

"May I come in?"

"Here at last!" Seraphima Gavrilovna greeted him in a friendly tone. "Please be seated."

Breathing heavily, he walked past the first, second and third rows and came towards Masha. On the way he said quickly to Kudaibergenov, "Seventeen point three". He gaped at Masha, wondering what she was doing there, sat down and took out an exercise-book from inside his jacket and an expensive-looking pen from his pocket.

"Has our time-table been read out yet?" he asked Masha.

"No, not yet," she replied.

His jacket smelt very slightly of smoke. It was a familiar acrid smell which reminded Masha of Musab.

Yerkin leant back against the white-washed wall and relaxed. He tried out his wonderful new pen on the cover of the exercise-book in front of him and enthusiastically wrote his name and surname.

While Seraphima Gavrilovna was explaining what they would be doing in algebra and geometry that year, Yerkin sniffed and said to Masha, "You're Masha Stepanova. Your father's a colonel." He said it as if she did not know herself.

Seraphima Gavrilovna heard him and snapped, "Sadvakasov, you seem to have got distracted by your interesting neighbour. Come up to the board. I've got a tricky little problem here that's been waiting for you all summer."

Yerkin jumped up as if he had been scolded.

Akatov hitched onto Masha as she was leaving school. She only had herself to blame because she could have gone on the bus with the other pupils from the cantonment but had decided to walk home instead. She had chosen to copy Yerkin and now had to pay for it.

"Do you realise it's dangerous for you to go alone!" joked Akatov. "This is the desert! There're predatory camels here which may attack a defenseless little stranger."

"Leave me alone," said Masha to no avail.

"Would you like me to tell you a secret? We've a saying in the steppe that goes like this: you can tell a secret to many people but only one of them will keep it. Perhaps you're just that person?"

Nurlan Akatov did, in fact, have a horrible secret which he had not even told Kolya Kudaibergenov. Of course, he wasn't going to tell this girl from the cantonment: he simply felt like having a giggle and a chat to take his mind off things.

They went past the railway-crossing where warning signs in Russian and Kazakh were nailed to a striped post.

Some breaks screeched behind them and they turned round to see Lieutenant Ryabov swing open the door of a green army jeep.

"Masha, are you going home?"

What a ridiculous question! Where else could she be going at that time of day with her satchel?

"Good day to you!" Masha's self-appointed escort cheekily saluted Ryabov. "Allow me to report! I have been ordered to accompany this young lady home. Any further orders?"

"Stand easy!" ordered Ryabov, laughing.

"In other words, I can clear off?" replied Akatov screwing up his eyes. "My lady, what do you wish me to convey to my best friend, Kolya Kudaibergenov? When I get back, he's bound to ask me excitedly if Masha wished to convey anything to him."

"Don't worry," said Ryabov. "This is Akatov, a well-known comic."

"I'm not," she replied irritably.

"Well, then let's get going," he said, helping Masha into the back. "Don't get upset by Akatov. He loves teasing and playing jokes. His chums call him Rusty Nail just as much for his character as for the colour of his hair."

Ryabov was well acquainted with the local schoolchildren. In the division he was in charge

of organising assistance to the school. It was he who permitted the men to attend school evenings and he who organised matches with the senior forms. The division did much to help the school. For instance, it had helped fit out its stadium and Lyovka Kocharyan, a Jack of all trades, had reset the school's stoves. Only recently aquariums had been installed in the cantonment, and were already standing in the school, too, and some fishes had been presented for breeding. These good mutual relations were very fragile, however, and if one of the men as much as looked too keenly at one of the girls at a school dance, all hell was let loose. Kocharyan, for instance, had stared at Aminá, a buxom girl with Asiatic features and shiny rosy cheeks from the tenth form. Unfortunately for him, it turned out that Aminá had a hefty tenth-former boyfriend called Isabek. All this infuriated Major Korotun but the headmaster, Akhmetov, simply chuckled and put it down to "youth".

Ryabov liked the heavily-built, plodding headmaster.

Akhmetov had been born and brought up in Chupchi. A year before the war broke out, he finished school, enrolled at a teachers' training college in Leningrad and then went straight to the front.

He told Ryabov once how, during battles, his division had been forced to retreat across the steppe in southern Russia, which was very similar to the Kazakh steppe, only on a smaller scale near Voronezh. It was there in the steppe that a chauffeur-driven car had rolled up to the column of soldiers and the division commissar sitting in front had ordered Akhmetov to get in and show them the way. He climbed in beside an aide-de-camp who kept

quiet. The division commissar turned sideways and began asking Akhmetov about his home background. Akhmetov told him about the Kazakh steppe and how he had tended sheep as a child, gone to the local village school and then won a place at the training college.

"You tended sheep with your father and then got into a college?" repeated the commissar in amazement.

And then Akhmetov realised this was not a commissar but a German saboteur! Why would a commissar be surprised that the son of a shepherd had studied at college? This could only be a foreigner who knew Russian well but did not know what life was like in the Soviet Union. And the other two in the car probably did not know Russian and so were keeping quiet.

As all this dawned on Akhmetov, the saboteur also sensed that he had been exposed. They had only a few seconds in which to decide who would get the better of whom. Meanwhile the chauffeur went on driving without guessing what had happened. Fortunately for Akhmetov, the car flew into a dusty little town jammed with vehicles. Akhmetov flung the door open and dived out of the car. While he was coming to, however, the saboteur had vanished into thin air, and he could only hand in a description of what they looked like. This incident made Akhmetov decide to join the intrepid landing force. Recalling the foreigner who spoke such perfect Russian, Akhmetov wondered why the saboteur had not been warned before setting out on his dangerous mission, that in the Soviet Union he might meet people who had been born in a yurt or mud hut and grown up to become scientists, actors and top-ranking officials. He had been taught everything about the Soviet

Union except these facts which were considered not worth mentioning.

That day the headmaster invited Ryabov over to discuss something most unpleasant.

"Our local militiaman, you know, Bukashev, came round to the school the other day," explained the headmaster, getting his breath back, "and informed me that someone keeps bringing stolen astrakhan skins through Chupchi and he's found out that the thieves are using a young lad as a go-between. Bukashev reckons he may be from our school."

"Astrakhan skins?" Ryabov shook his head. "That's serious. It's a pity if one of our lads has got involved. Thieves know how to keep a person under their thumb. Did Bukashev mention any of our lads in particular?"

"Yes, as usual Mazitov from the fifth B form and Akatov from the eighth B form..."

"Akatov's out of the question. He's a talented lad. The last evening we held he sang one of his own compositions. He's a born singer."

"I remember his grandfather, *akyn* Sadyk. He wasn't a top-ranking *akyn*, I admit, but on several occasions he competed with some of the very best men." The headmaster spoke more and more slowly and hesitantly. "You'll most likely think badly of me but, despite my professional duties as a teacher, I am not impartial to my pupils, that is, I do not feel the same about all of them. In theory, yes, but in my heart of hearts, no. Do you know Museké's youngest son?"

"Yerkin? I've played chess and *togyz-kumalak* against him many times. He's a bright lad."

"When Kazakhs wish to praise someone, we

sometimes call him a *jurekty*, which means 'lion-heart'. We contrast the lion's heart with that of the greedy wolf. A lion-heart doesn't trail after another's caravan like a dog: he knows how to put his horse on the right track without being told. He's sometimes submissive but only when a just cause is involved but even this he finds hard. But he doesn't submit to anything which cannot stand the test of reason." The headmaster paused for breath. "But your dear Akatov is too light-headed and he does everything in too much of a light-hearted manner. If he does anything well, it's sure to have been light and easy and if he does something bad, he always gets off lightly."

Seraphima Gavrilovna appeared in the middle of this conversation. She always treated the lieutenant as if he had only just left school himself. At his men's request, on more than one occasion, Ryabov had tried to persuade her not to give tests to the tenth-formers the morning after a party but she stuck to her guns, declaring, "I've been setting tests after school parties all my life. You can't give them new material after parties because their thoughts are miles away."

"I've told the lieutenant about the skins," the headmaster informed her. "One or two things have become clear during our conversation."

"About Mazitov?" she asked, very much wanting confirmation.

"Possibly. Lieutenant Ryabov, however, considers we should be looking for someone softer and more cowardly..."

This came as a surprise to Ryabov because he had surely said nothing of the sort!

CHAPTER TWO

It was always obvious a lorry had made a long trip: there would be something unusual about it. Pasha Kolesnikov's vehicle had a bluish-black bundle of feathers attached to its front bumper. It was, in fact, a dead bird.

Since it was not carrying a load, it rumbled through Chupchi, leaving a trail of dust as it swept past the department store, post office and tearooms and drove round the school, stopping by the wooden arch bearing the sign, 'Chupchi School Boarding-House'. The arch stood imposingly on its own, without a fence, and two identical slate-roofed houses stood behind it.

The cabin door opened and a girl in a black plush coat and a large brightly-coloured scarf climbed down onto the step. It was she, Sholpan Baijanova, whom the head-teacher had asked the eighth B form about on the first day of term.

Fair-haired Pasha jumped down on the other side and removed from the bumper the dead bird, whose small head was drooping on one side.

"Look, Sholpan! Do you remember how some jackdaws were flying over the road when we crossed the pass?"

Sholpan looked timidly at the dead jackdaw from a distance.

"It's beautiful. Here, take it."

"Poor bird," Sholpan stepped back.

"Why, you're afraid, aren't you!" he whistled in surprise. "And I thought you wouldn't be. There you were all alone sitting with your little case in the steppe with not a soul about on the roadside. You were lucky I went that way by mistake. What if I hadn't?"

"I'd have sat and waited a bit longer and then started walking and stop for a rest every now and then. I know the way."

Sholpan's parents were in no hurry to send her off to school and her elder sister was completely taken up by her happiness and her fiancé's visits. When Sholpan had finished sewing everything that her mother had given her, she took her suitcase, which she had packed a long time ago, and set off.

Pasha Kolesnikov was originally from Vologda. He had come to Chupchi to do his military service. He told Sholpan how during the first year of his service he kept losing his way in the steppe although everything seemed to be plainly visible. One day he was given instructions to drive in such a way that the burial mound with the black top remained on his right. He did as he was told but could see nothing at all ahead of him. At last he spotted some roofs and as he drew closer, recognised the cantonment where he had started off. He had done a full circle keeping the mound on his right! From then on he was nicknamed Magellan because he had proved once again that the world was round.

While serving in Chupchi, Pasha used to go with some other soldiers to help on a milk farm run by young people. It was there that he met and married Tonya and then took her home to his folks in Vologda. Tonya liked it there because it was lovely and green but after a while they decided to go back to the wide open spaces of Chupchi.

Pasha told Sholpan his life story because she did not say anything herself and he was afraid he would fall asleep as the road in the steppe was so even. If you dozed off for a moment, the next thing you knew, you were upside down.

Sholpan had no idea of this road hazard and

could not understand why Pasha was confiding so much to her on the way. She was very bad at talking about herself, even when she was with Saulé.

Pasha swung his arm and threw the bird into the tall dry bushes and something stirred in them.

"Come out or you've had it!" demanded Pasha.

"All right, all right!" A boy in a new school uniform crawled out of the bush. Salman had been well looked after this year, too, for the school had handed out another suit, coat and pair of boots to him.

"Mazitov!" Sholpan heard herself saying in a strict teacher's voice. "Why aren't you in class?"

"Why aren't you?" snarled Salman.

"Come here!" ordered Pasha threateningly.

Salman started running off but sensing that he wasn't being pursued, sneaked back to the bushes, dived in and dragged out the bird and dashed off into the steppe.

"He's absolutely wild," said Pasha. "Well, Sholpan, goodbye, I'm going now."

Clear smoke was rising from the boarding-house where the kitchen, dining-room and girls' dormitories were situated. There were always fewer girls than boys who lived in the house next door.

As Sholpan was carefully wiping her shoes on the wet sack laid across the porch floor, Naskét the cook rushed out, steaming-hot, and threw her moist arms around her, kissing and hugging her to her large fleshy body.

"Well, let me see who's this?" She turned Sholpan round and unwrapped her scarf. "Why, it's my Sholpan! My clever little girl! Your friend's been over here. She's really worried about you."

Sholpan pulled off her shoes and walked in her stockinged feet across the plank floor to her dormitory in which there were eight beds, eight bedside lockers and a large table. She opened her locker door and saw that her old books were still there and that someone had left her the new ones she would be needing that coming year. She looked into the wardrobe and saw a new school dress and two aprons, one black, the other white, hanging in it. So, new uniforms had already been issued to all the boarders.

Squatting on her heels, she quickly unpacked her small pile of underwear and other bits and pieces, which included a ball of natural-coloured wool, a pebble with a hole in it which Saulé had brought back to her from the Crimea as a talisman, and a bunch of pheasant feathers, and put them all into her locker. Then she ran over to the washroom and was soon sitting in the kitchen opposite Auntie Naskét and dipping her spoon into a tasty thick vegetable soup.

"Are there many new boys and girls?" she asked.

"Six in the first form..." Auntie Naskét sighed deeply.

"They won't eat your beetroot soup?" asked Sholpan, guessing what the matter was at once.

"Askar Sarsekeyev from Thaelmann and Kulash Nazarova from Baiserké did rightaway but the other four just turned their noses up at everything—the beetroot soup, the meat rissoles and the cabbage pies. I asked the Head to let me serve noodle soup, like they're used to at home, during the autumn term but he's dead against it. You can give them that in spring, he said, but they need more vegetables to keep fit in winter."

"That's true!" agreed Sholpan who had already

finished her soup. Auntie Naskét pushed a frying pan full of fried potatoes towards her. "Last year we ate noodle soup all through the spring term."

"Because we ran out of spuds," admitted Auntie Naskét gloomily. "But I won't be caught out this year because I've stored twice as many."

"I love potatoes!" said Sholpan, scraping up the last crunchy pieces with her fork.

"You do now!" said Auntie Naskét, putting a glass of stewed fruit juice in front of her.

She had worked in the boarding-house ever since it had opened. The headmaster enjoyed discussing educational problems with her and relied as much on the wise cook who lived with the children all the time as on his experienced head-teacher. However, Auntie Naskét did not tell him everything that was going on. She could never see eye to eye with the head-teacher over vitamins. Cook believed that onion and garlic were full of vitamins and good at warding off all kinds of illnesses and that was why all the boarders, except the senior girls, reeked of "vitamins" in class. And there was nothing Seraphima Gavrilovna could do about it, even though she was very good at getting convincing results from her various teaching experiments.

During the first days of the autumn term, when the shepherds' children from remote villages, who had never been away from home, refused to eat and mistrustfully pushed aside their plates, Auntie Naskét would shout angrily at them and then burst into tears. But what could you expect! The little ones weren't used to eating cabbage, beetroot or fruit juices at home. At first, Sholpan had also been afraid of the green blobs floating in hot water. This was her way of describing cabbage soup!

"Thank you, I'm absolutely full!" As usual she

ran over to the wash-basin, washed the plate and rinsed the glass.

"You can have another meal later," said Auntie Naskét. "They'll eat up when they see you do. Keep your eye on Askar Sarsekeyev. Nurlan's been put in charge of him. How could Nurlan be in charge of anybody?" Auntie Naskét pursed her lips disapprovingly. "You know, he's started playing knucklebones* for money. I saw him myself playing at the back of the market."

"Perhaps he was just playing for fun and not for money?"

"Do you think I can't tell the difference? He had some money on him when he arrived from home. He earned some himself and some his father gave him. His father's not very bright, he really isn't. What does a schoolboy need money for when everything here is free?"

"Who else does he play with? We'll bring this up at the next boarding-house meeting."

"That's the point: he doesn't play with anyone from here. Do you know who I saw him with at the market? Mazitov!"

"Salman?"

"It wouldn't have been so bad if it had been with him. No, he was with Salman's old man."

Sholpan realised that if he was playing knucklebones for money and, what's more, doing so with Salman's old man behind the market, it meant that Nurlan Akatov of eighth B form was really in trouble.

When the first formers came running in from school, Sholpan sat down to eat with them. She liked the look of Askar and could tell straightaway that

* Game played with sheep's knucklebones.— *Ed.*

he would get on all right at school. And she would be only too pleased to sew on a new collar or press his trousers for him.

The hospital gates were already locked for the night and the nasty watchman took ages opening them although Dospayev himself had instructed him to admit Sholpan whenever she came, with Saulé or on her own.

"What do you want?" The watchman came out, yawning morosely. He always pretended not to recognise her.

Sholpan slipped past him through the half-open gates and walked across the spacious hospital courtyard.

Seven years ago her father had brought her to the hospital in Chupchi and a woman in a white coat had squeezed her and pressed a cold piece of metal against her chest and back. A Russian woman had asked her father in Kazakh, "Your daughter's already eight, why haven't you brought her here before?" "Because she's been too sick all the time." Her father had lied: Sholpan had never been sick before in her life. That spring, when there was still snow on the ground, she had been helping her mother with the lambing. Why had her father told a lie? Was he afraid? She certainly was! But then a Kazakh in a white coat had come round, looked at Sholpan and called to someone, "Saulé, come over here!"

The head doctor, Dospayev, was not like anybody else in Chupchi. People always did what he said. He wasn't a collective farm chairman or high-ranking official and could not punish anyone for not obeying him but everyone did because he really was the

head doctor. Dospayev told the headmaster to enroll Sholpan Baijanova in One B even though she knew no Russian. The headmaster had to agree but told the doctor's daughter, Saulé, to look after her. And the girl, who was smaller than Sholpan, replied importantly, "Yes, of course I will."

...Sholpan went up to the house in the far corner of the yard. It was the oldest house in all Chupchi and had carved wooden platbands, heavy shutters and a wooden balcony running round it. Saulé's great-great-grandfather, an exiled Polish revolutionary, had built it on the bare steppe next to the small hospital he had opened. The doctor was renowned among the local people for his astonishing knowledge of steppe herbs and next to his house and tiny hospital sprang up an *aul* which became known as Chupchi.

"Sholpan! At last you're here!" Saulé flew out onto the balcony, slipping out of her slippers as she ran and pushing her feet back into them again.

Sholpan noticed an army overcoat hanging from the old deer-antler coat-rack in the hall. Volodya was there. He was always warmly welcomed by the Dospayevs and Sophia Kazimirovna would always say to him, "Don't forget about us. Do come round."

The dining-room was brightly lit up. A silver samovar was puffing and whistling in a corner. Jam in little dishes, a sugar bowl and a china cheese-board were arranged on the starched tablecloth and Sophia Kazimirovna was carrying in some hot crispy toast on a carved wooden tray from the kitchen.

"I did as you said and kept them in the oven for less time than usual. They're a bit too soft for me."

"Excellent!" Volodya took a piece of toast and tried it. "Just perfect... My mother's speciality... toast. We brought back an excellent toaster from

England. Mind you, the toasters we make nowadays aren't at all bad." He shyly took another slice. "But we soldiers get so famished that we aren't interested in subtleties of this kind."

"Please, do eat!" said Sophia Kazimirovna. "Sholpan, here's the crispiest slice for you. You've been at home for so long that we had already begun worrying about you."

"Rubbish!" hotly disputed her husband. "What on earth was there to be worried about? Nothing."

His face was tired-looking and his voice cracked. Sholpan wondered if he had undergone an operation and if so, whether it had been a difficult and dangerous one. She knew that it would not be proper to ask.

"I was at a regional meeting the day before yesterday. Your father was named among the best shepherds. He got one hundred and thirty lambs from a hundred ewes, if I'm not mistaken?"

"One hundred and thirty-five!"

"Sadvakasov got one hundred and forty-three. That's not much more."

"My father says it's going to be a hard winter this year."

"And when was it ever a good one? It's bad when there're snowstorms but also bad when it's too mild," he said and turned to Saulé. "Incidentally, at the meeting I met the new command from the cantonment, Colonel Stepanov. It appears his daughter's in the eighth form."

"Yes, she's in our class," replied Saulé reluctantly.

"Have you already made friends?"

"Daddy, how on earth can you go and make friends straightaway?"

"You can. I personally believe that you can strike up a friendship at once," her father replied,

slowly sipping his tea. "What do you think, colleague?"

He meant Sholpan.

"I believe ... in friendship, too..." The crunchy toast and cheese got stuck in her throat.

"You and I always think alike, colleague," concluded Dospayev.

"You know, she's put herself out and started going to Kazakh language lessons," said Saulé, and Sholpan immediately understood who "she" was. "Alik didn't bother to go but she does. The teacher always asks her the simplest questions and gives her top marks."

"But as she's never studied the language before she can't be expected to answer the same questions as you," Sophia Kazimirovna stood up for the new girl.

"Who's she sitting next to?" asked Sholpan.

"Yerkin. He was late on the first day and she chose the back desk herself. You know what Yerkin's like! He came and sat down next to her. Well, and now Seraphima Gavrilovna keeps making cracks about them for fun. Of course, there's nothing between them for if there were Faridá would have already spread rumours about them all over Chupchi. Yes, and here's a piece of gossip about Faridá: somebody's scratched 'F + N = LOVE' on the basketball post."

"About Faridá and who else?"

"Nurlan's furious and says if he finds out who did it, he'll knock their head off!" giggled Saulé.

Saulé's mother made sure her other guest felt at home. Volodya Muromtsev had been born in India where his father had been working in the Soviet consulate and did not learn Russian until he was four. Then the Muromtsevs moved to England

but Volodya's father always remained deeply attached to India. Many other Russians had been bewitched by India. Among them was the artist Nikolai Roerich.

"My father was a good friend of his," recalled Volodya. "Roerich did some wonderful paintings of mountains but I'm absolutely amazed by the vast expanses here. The steppe gives one such a marvellous sense of freedom!"

"I'm so pleased you like it!" said Saulé's mother who was always delighted when anyone praised the steppe and Chupchi. Academician Sadvakasov had been right when he said that her family were almost more attached to this land than the Kazakhs themselves.

"Saulé let me have a look at the books in her room. Books, you know, never disappear from our bedside lockers. In fact, nothing ever does..."

"Of course, do borrow some," she said. "In the attic you'll find complete sets of old journals."

Volodya shook his head in admiration.

"How I envy you, Saulé! You've got so many books in your house and your house, too, is so wonderfully old."

"Saulé's not interested in old things, she's only in the future," said Dospayev. "She's a keen astronomer and an avid science-fiction fan." He had touched his wife's sore spot for she wanted her daughter to become a doctor whereas Saulé first wanted to be a geologist and now was talking about becoming an astronomer.

Dospayev stood up and abruptly pushed his chair back.

"Please will my guests excuse me... I've got to pop and see my post-ops."

Sholpan knew that all the time Dospayev was thinking about someone lying in the post-operation-

al ward. And as he thought, he would draw on the table with a spoon and recall some surgical instrument he used. Surely he couldn't have done anything wrong that day? No, that was impossible: he never made mistakes.

"Colleague, I'd be pleased if you kept me company."

"Me?" asked Sholpan confusedly. Why did he want her to go with him round the hospital? What's more, he would be going round the most important ward!

"Sholpan," said Sophia Kazimirovna. "You can take my coat from behind the door of our bedroom."

Sholpan ran skipingly across the yard after Dospayev. The lights had already been switched off in the children's wards and were shining dimly in the other windows. People in pyjamas were sitting or lying on their beds, doing something or other.

Dospayev caused a stir when he appeared in the corridor of the surgical ward because nobody knew where he could be going at this late hour. Doors opened on either side although nobody had run ahead to announce his appearance. A woman in a white starched gauze turban rose from behind the table at the end of the corridor. It was Nurse Rosa Khasanovna whose niece, Faridá, was in the same class as Sholpan and Saulé.

"Good evening! Oh, look who's with you! I thought it was Saulé. Hello, Sholpan! There's no reason for you to worry, doctor. The patient has just dropped off to sleep."

There was a door just beyond the table. Dospayev pushed it open abruptly and soundlessly. In the middle of the spacious, dimly lit ward stood a solitary bed in which someone very tiny was lying. Sholpan thought at first it was a little girl but as she looked

closer, she saw it was a yellow-faced, tiny old woman. She was lying flat on her back and snoring loudly. Dospayev sat down on the stool by her bedside and the nurse stood behind him. He began asking her brusquely about something which Sholpan could not understand and the nurse replied in a respectful and succinct manner.

And then Sholpan realised that the old woman could not be simply asleep because old people are usually very light sleepers and wake up at the drop of a pin whereas this old woman went on snoring. No, she was not asleep: she had been knocked out by drugs. There was something horribly unnatural about her breathing and you could not look at her simply out of curiosity. No, Sholpan thought, when you came in here, you first had to know something and then be able to do something in the post-operational ward. Yes, you had to be able at least to do something positive to help but Sholpan could not do anything at all.

Dospayev stood up and walked out and Sholpan followed him as if she was on a string.

"After you, colleague!" He opened the door marked "Theatre" and flicked the switch. They were at once plunged into darkness and became invisible, as it were, and the light of a massive lamp with many spotlights shone directly on the narrow table covered with a hospital sheet.

"This is where we operate..." Dospayev flicked the switch again.

The bright light vanished and some dull spheres shone overhead, casting light evenly across the room and on the glass cupboards along the walls and the shiny instruments on the glass shelves.

"This one is like any other theatre in a country hospital. However, the patient you saw could not

be saved in Moscow, Leningrad or anywhere else. She believed that I would save her but there was nothing I could do. I cut her open, had a look and then sewed her up again. I told her son the whole truth but said nothing to her. When I let her leave hospital, she'll assure me that she feels much better but I know that she has got less than a year to live. And now you know everything, too, Sholpan, but I'm sure you won't tell anyone. This is your first medical secret."

"Yes," replied Sholpan very quietly.

"Why aren't you asking me about the old woman's illness and operation?"

"May I?"

"Yes, please do."

"Why did she come to the hospital? Was something troubling her?"

"She's already eighty and she's never been ill in her life. She's brought up nine children and now has seventeen grandchildren and four great-grandchildren. Her children noticed that she'd stopped eating meat and was only drinking tea with flat cakes. Her eldest son drove her to hospital. She had never been treated before. We examined her, took tests and had some x-rays made. Old people usually get upset and frightened by all these things but she finds them fascinating. It's as if she's at the theatre, following everything on the stage. Her youthful eyes are filled with curiosity... She's got cancer of the liver and kidneys, she's riddled with it... Terrible, isn't it?"

"And nothing hurts?"

"That's the ghastly thing about cancer. It acts swiftly in a young body but very slowly, as a rule, in an old one. Elderly people sometimes drag on longer. So, that's the way it is... Would you like to

go round the theatre and see what's in the cupboards?"

He stood in the doorway with his hands deep inside his coat pockets. Sholpan silently walked past the glass cupboards, trying to guess for instance, what the pair of scissors with the round ends were used for and what the shiny tube connected to the glass flask was called.

As she looked round, she tried to memorise everything for the future and caught glimpses of her reflection in the glass everywhere. And all the time in her mind's eye she saw the ward with one bed and the tiny yellow-faced old woman lying in an unnaturally deep sleep on the almost uncreased white sheet.

After passing the third row of glass cupboards, she reached Dospayev who was waiting impatiently for her.

"I've seen everything, thank you."

"Do you like it here?"

"Very much."

"Then listen to me carefully. You and I are going to have a very serious talk."

Sholpan noticed that Dospayev's hands were tensely clenched inside his coat pockets.

"Would you like to become head doctor here one day?" he asked and looked searchingly at her.

"Me?" she asked in a startled voice. "I don't know."

"Yes, you would," he nodded confidently. "You'd like to cure people and to build new hospital wings in Chupchi and travel around the *auls* in a red-cross ambulance. Well then, see that you make it. You're going to be head doctor here, right, colleague?"

"Right."

"Well, that's wonderful," Dospayev got out his cigarettes and matches and lit up.

...A lively conversation on an interesting subject was going on in the dining-room as before. During the hour they had been away, Saulé had grown even more beautiful or at least that is what Sholpan thought.

"I really couldn't allow myself to leave without you, Sholpan!" Volodya jumped up and clicked the heels of his boots. "Can we hurry, though? It's stricter in our division than at the boarding-house."

"I'll go on my own!" said Sholpan, blushing.

She could tell that Volodya was only putting on an act and was not being sincere but Saulé liked everything about him, especially the way he talked and behaved. He was not like the local boys: he was much more self-confident but, at the same time, behaved more naturally. That in any case, was what Saulé thought. Even the watchman he would greet with a friendly smile and offer him a cigarette and at once the hospital entrance door would magically swing open.

"Go on, Sholpan!" ordered Saulé. "Why go alone when Volodya will see you home!"

Volodya walked along beside Saulé's shy head-strong friend and smiled at his own thoughts. In the milieu he had grown up in, young men rarely served in the army of their own accord. Volodya undoubtedly could have got into an institute after finishing school but he had not wanted to. A diplomat's son, he considered that the army was the best school for a future diplomat. He had been too lucky to be sent to Asia and equally lucky to find intellectual company in this God-forsaken desert. And then there was Saulé! She would soon be fifteen and would finish school in two years' time and then get into

Moscow University. She was bound to, firstly, because she was intelligent and, secondly, because she was very determined.

He walked along and smiled at his wonderful future plans. Allah had given woman twenty-four gifts of beauty but the most important of them all was intelligence. Passers-by in Moscow would stop and stare at them and marvel at what an outstanding couple they made!

He said good-bye to Sholpan by the boarding-house gates. It was not considered proper in Chupchi for soldiers to appear so close but Volodya had his own code of conduct and always saw the girls he knew home. As ill luck would have it, one of Sholpan's classmates came running out to meet them. It was Nurlan who had been looking everywhere for her because he wanted her to patch a hole in his new raincoat.

And she found Askar sitting in the dining-room with his fingers crammed in his ears, repeating verses in his primer over and over again. Although he was concentrating hard, he spotted Sholpan and craftily slipped into the older girls' dormitory after her and Nurlan, who was carrying his raincoat which was supposedly torn.

"My granny had an operation today! Uncle Urazbek dropped in with some salami and other goodies for me. I'll go and get them if you like," he said and tore off to fetch the tuck.

Askar's granny! So that was whom Sholpan had seen earlier in the post-operational ward.

"What's the matter, Sholpan?" asked Aminá, a tenth-former. "You've gone as white as a sheet!" She showed Nurlan the door and called after him. "Come back tomorrow. You can see for yourself that she's tired."

Askar flew into the room, clutching his tuck from home in both hands and pressing it against his stomach.

"Here! Have some, Sholpan! Help yourselves, everyone. Uncle Urazbek's brought me a lot. I'd like everyone to have some. Granny's had an operation! I'm going to visit her tomorrow. She's going to get better soon. Uncle says she's going to live to be a hundred!"

Sholpan felt dreadful, much more so than at the hospital. Here was Askar larking about while his granny was lying in a drugged sleep. He was saying she would live to be a hundred whereas, in fact, she only had a year left. Somewhere far away, no, deep inside, she could hear a loud wail similar to those heard in *auls* during funeral services when the earthly deeds of the deceased were being praised. But this wail was heard only by her and all the others heard only her silence.

All of granny's nine children and seventeen grandchildren would come to bury her. They would chose a wide-open space and dig the grave in such a way that she would be facing east. Then each of them would toss a handful of earth onto her grave and say, "May a good spirit go with you." Then they would all go away, except for the old folks who would count forty steps and then go back and say loudly, "Granny was good, kind and loving..." Elderly people believed that as they walked forty steps away, Archangel Jebrail descended into the grave and began asking the deceased if she had lived piously. But as it was not right for one to praise oneself, her relatives had to get back to the grave in time to start praising her among themselves as loudly as possible so that Jebrail overheard them... And then they would mourn her for a whole year

and from all over the steppe people would come and console Askar's father by saying, "May her offspring live and prosper!"

Was it possible to see and know all this ahead of time? No, it wasn't! But Sholpan had gone beyond the normal limits of time and had been given a glimpse of death in a year's time, just as one sees things that have already happened. Why had she let herself find out something that weak people could not, should not and did not want to know?

Sholpan repressed the cry that only she could hear and said to Askar in the tone of an elder sister,

"Thank you for the treat. If you're allowed into the hospital tomorrow, show granny your exercise-books and drawing album."

"Shall I show her the napkin, too? You know, I embroidered a daisy in our hobby class!"

"A daisy!"

Dospayev had said that the patient found everything interesting. So perhaps she would find it amusing that their future menfolk were being taught embroidery at school!

"Yes, do show her! But now it's time to go to bed."

Askar disappeared in a flash.

"No swotting at night, girls!" Aminá ran her hand down the buttons of her tight fitting dressing-gown and ran across to the switch. "Lights out!"

Sholpan curled into a ball and pulled the blanket over her head.

That night she dreamed she was driving along a road in the steppe with Saulé at the wheel beside her instead of Pasha Kolesnikov. When did Saulé learn to drive a car? She wondered but did not ask where they were going: Saulé knew and was in a

terrible hurry to get there. They drove on and on... Yerkin was standing by the roadside with a crushed jackdaw in his hand, which he waved at Saulé and Sholpan and shouted for them to stop but they flew past. Sholpan cried to Saulé to stop and woke up.

She would have forgotten the strange dream quickly, just as one forgets all dreams with time if a few days later she had not caught sight of the jackdaw in school. No longer a limp bunch of shiny feathers, it was standing proudly like a live bird on a cupboard in the biology laboratory and the white tag attached to it read "Made by S. Mazitov and V. Stepanov, the fifth B form."

Dospayev had carried out a difficult and unnecessary operation, striving to justify the hopes of Urazbek's mother. Her children now had a clear conscience because they had done everything to save her but Dospayev could not let his conscience rest.

Trust that handsome chatterbox, Muromtsev, to pour more salt onto his wound that evening! Damn him! He could make you jealous of him because of your wife, let alone your daughter! But he wasn't telling lies for he really had been born in India and grown up in England... What on earth could he want from a fourteen-year-old girl who lived in the steppe?

He disliked having this unpleasant guest in his house so much that he completely lost his counterpoise that evening when he began speaking to Sholpan, perhaps prematurely, of her right to become head doctor at the hospital.

When he was at last left alone with his wife, he said,

"I don't like the way that cocksure fellow from Moscow has started coming round here."

"Why?"

"Do I really have to explain?"

"No, I suppose not," she smiled gently. "I understand, you know, why you don't like him. He's spread his tail-feathers like a peacock, hasn't he..."

"And our Saulé can't take her eyes off him."

"Yes, she finds him fascinating. He's not like the local boys. I myself enjoyed listening when he began talking about India and Roerich. In his student days, Grandfather used to go to art exhibitions and I remember his stories about Roerich. Do you know who he once went to an exhibition opening in St. Petersburg with? Mikhail Frunze, Lenin's comrade-in-arms. They were in the same class at school."

"Why didn't you mention this when our guest was here?"

"I remember Grandfather too well!" she replied, chuckling. "I once asked him why he didn't write his memoirs of Frunze and do you know what he said in reply? He said, 'I wasn't invited around to their house to snoop about and write things down.' Grandfather had a heart of stone. And Saulé, by the way, not only takes after you, she also takes after him."

"All the same, she's already fourteen but this fellow's..."

"Trying to treat her as if she were still a child whereas, in fact... Well, if you want to know what I think... She's imperious and proud—both of us know that. And she's now not at an age when you can ask her questions. And besides, it's not a good thing for a girl to be too open with her mother and pretend she's a woman, too. I don't like that sort of relationship. I think a daughter should be able to

understand how her mother feels without asking her advice. You and I can always sense what's the matter with her without asking. And it's imperative that her view of life be her very own and differ in some ways from ours..."

"So, what *is* the matter with her?"

"I'm not sure, I'm only guessing. She and Sholpan have always considered Yerkin Sadvakasov to be Sholpan's love. Sholpan's a very single-minded young lady and her child-like affection for Yerkin is, too. I don't imagine she speaks about it even to Saulé. And then all of a sudden this other girl has appeared in school and either she has fallen in love with Yerkin or the other way round. They're in the eighth form, don't forget! I can see that Saulé's taking everything very much to heart. She really is. She dislikes the other girl. But what if she's keen on Museké's youngest son, too?"

"Saulé?"

"He means more than the others to her: there's something special about the way he says and does everything. And you know, he really is intelligent and independent and wants to make something of his life. All the Sadvakasovs have strong characters..."

"What are you explaining that to me for?" Dospaev flared up. "Do you think I've never seen the lad myself?"

"You're irritated at the moment and that's why you're being unfair. But I could tell that you used to like Yerkin."

"We're talking about Saulé and not about me! What matters is whether she likes him or not!"

"If Saulé's got a secret, she'll never tell anyone, not even us or Sholpan. Our Saulé's got a strong character, too. It's not easy for a girl of her age to have a strong character. It may sometimes be her

Achilles' heel, this strong will of hers and habit of being first in line. You see, she feels it her duty to help the defenseless and in doing so, acts in a naively tyrannical manner."

"Tyrannical? All right, let's say she's tyrannical but, to make up for it, she's not volatile in her friendships. She's given a lot to Sholpan and learnt a lot from her in return..."

Through the wall, in the children's room, Saulé, who loved sitting up late, was sitting at a table which had been scratched by penknives and scorched by magnifying glasses for well over a century. She was having trouble solving a problem from a printed copy of a set of examination questions. This set, which was the only one of its kind in Chupchi, Volodya had ordered in Moscow especially for Saulé. She was determined not to go to bed until she had solved a problem about a triangle which at first glance seemed simple but which had a hidden twist to it.

If she showed the problem to Yerkin, he was bound to solve it in some inexplicable way. She, on the other hand, was no good at guess-work and had to work everything out logically.

The triangle is the most stable figure in geometry. Three firmly linked dots... Sholpan, Saulé and who else? The new girl? What a ridiculously illogical thought! But, perhaps, she was right?

CHAPTER THREE

In a new place, future relationships often depend on how the first day goes but, unfortunately for the newcomer, on the first day he is completely at a loss and has to rely entirely on his own set of rules

for he does not yet know how the new game is played. Everyone else, on the other hand, has already learnt the general rules of play and he is the odd-man-out. He therefore feels highly self-conscious because he knows he can be seen in all his true colours.

Masha felt this acutely on her first day. When she left her last school, she was also forced to leave behind the trend-setting image she had created for herself by being a sports champion and by projecting qualities which were highly valued there. Now she was still not certain whether these same qualities were worth anything here. Her image was like a shell, protecting her weaknesses and hiding her faults, and when it cracked like an egg, it revealed something soft and fragile inside.

Masha realised that all her faults were on display that day. This seemed doubly unfair because she knew nothing about the others and just a little about Faridá, Akatov, and Kolya Kudaibergenov, who, as opposites, were strongly attracted to each other.

Masha also knew that she could very easily get on the wrong side of Saulé Dospayeva and she did not wish this to happen because Saulé, unlike Faridá, was highly respected by the rest of her class. She felt hurt that Saulé, whom she had taken an instant liking to, had for some unknown reason refused to let her sit next to her.

Many of the things, which upset you on the first day, may leave their mark on you.

A couple of days later Saulé, who was the class's Komsomol leader, asked Masha what community activities she liked.

"I enjoy teaching people to swim," Masha replied enthusiastically. She would not have been so forthright with Kolya, Akatov or Faridá because she remembered what her father had said about showing

off in front of the local children but Saulé was much more sophisticated and worldly-wise than Masha.

"And what else?" Saulé had asked condescendingly.

"In winter I can give skating lessons!"

Saulé had promised to try and find her something to do and a week later had asked if Masha would consider being in charge of the third formers. That was how she had put it and Masha had replied, no, she couldn't consider it although she could have said what she had been thinking, which was, "Oh, come on! Me, in charge? I couldn't cope!"

And Saulé could have noticed her confusion and guessed the true cause of her refusal but she had not wished to. They had not argued: only friends do that. They had spoken politely and formally and nobody, not even Yerkin, who sat next to Masha had paid any attention to their short conversation. Yerkin was in a world of his own which Masha knew nothing about.

She started studying Kazakh and the Head asked Yerkin to help her pronounce Kazakh words correctly.

In her text-book she noticed there was a tail attached to the bottom of the letter "k" in the word "Kazakh" which meant it was special. You could hear the cackling of steppe birds in the word "Kkkkkkazakhhh". Their letter "o" did not sound round but was "tapered", so to speak, to sound like a combination of "e" and "u".

She did not have to get used to sitting next to a boy because for the past two years she had sat next to Vovka Ogurienkov, a scruffy fellow with chapped hands, big ears and a runny nose. His jacket reeked of pigeons and his satchel was always full of wire and nuts and bolts. There was no point looking

for a ruler or a pair of compasses in it for that was what you were there for. It was your job to bring all the school things he needed and help him out when he was stuck, let him copy off you and not leave him to the mercy of fate. In short, you had to play nursemaid to a snotty-nosed little twit. That was what sitting next to a boy in class was all about. And then he wrote you a note saying, "Dear Masha, let's be friends" and caught you up in a dark street and gave you a sloppy kiss on the cheek. And, finally, he came to see you off at the station and climbed up a lamp-post to see if the train was coming.

The skin under Yerkin's fingernails was red and ragged and his wire hair stuck up. His jacket reeked of fire smoke like the town Musab where the colourful hoopoe bird lived. But one thing was certain: he didn't need a nursemaid...

"Thirty-seven point eight!" said Natalia Petrovna angrily about her daughter. "I'm not surprised in the least. The wind's terrible here—blows right through you. Last Sunday Masha and I hardly made it home from the market. I chilled to the bone. I thought I'd had it. And then we would have to meet a horrible old man, a right rogue he was! He stopped his donkey and asked us if we wanted to buy some pure woollen cardigans off him. I wouldn't have minded buying one but it's dangerous dealing with such shady types."

"To put it mildly!" remarked Stepanov.

"Anyway, I didn't say a word to him. Then he glanced spitefully at Masha and said, 'Your daughter's not much to look at. Mind you, she's at a difficult age, she is. But when you marry her off, you'll get lots of money for her...' Nasty old man! The mere

sight of him gave me the jitters and then there was that terrible wind. I've told Masha countless times to stop wearing that skimpy jacket and put on her nice brand-new winter coat and her lovely fox-fur hat... But, oh no, I won't put it on until it snows, she says, and now she's gone and got a cold. Vitya's been wearing his fur coat and cap and feels fine. And, what's more, she goes to school with everyone on the bus but will insist on walking the five-odd kilometres back across the open steppe... Is that your idea of a walk? You go for a walk to get some fresh air but there's no such thing here. You've only got the wind here. And so that's why you've caught cold."

"What's got into you?" asked Masha's father, putting his cold hand, which smelt of leather, to her forehead. "I thought you were really tough."

"The doctor's coming today," said her mother. "She's a pediatrician at the local hospital. Maria Semyonovna's worried it might be diphtheria and that we'll give it to all the babies."

"Diphtheria? How could she get that here? You said yourself, you know, that there's no fresh air here, only wind."

"Hello, my name's Dr. Dospayeva. What's yours? Show me your tongue, Masha. Lift up your nightie so that I can hear what you sound like... Has she ever had bronchitis? I can't see much's the matter with her. There's nothing to make me suspect diphtheria. And she hasn't got scarlet fever or measles either. It's all to do with changing climates. You'll get used to it after you've lived here awhile. You're in the same class as my Saulé, aren't you? I'll let the girls know today how you are... Yes, you'd better stay at home for about ten days. Have you got any

other children?.. Strip to your waist, Vitya. Breathe... Stop breathing... Yes, you're in tip-top shape, Vitya."

Natalia Petrovna liked the *aul* doctor very much and was most surprised to find such a charming, well-educated woman in a hole like Chupchi.

"Have you been in Chupchi long?" Natalia Petrovna was ready to commiserate with her for she felt that the same misfortune had befallen them.

"All my life," replied the doctor simply, "I was born here and this is where I'll die."

Natalia Petrovna shook her head vaguely.

"We're always on the move..." She usually explained everything that she considered necessary when introducing herself to someone worthwhile, describing how she had travelled all her life and brought up her children without grandparents or experience of family life, how Masha had been born on a train and Vitya in an unbearably hot town called Musab...

Natalia Petrovna never minded if the person she was speaking to did not reply so frankly because everyone was different.

Masha's door was open and she could hear everything.

"We girls were sent from the orphanage to a vocational school where we were taught weaving. After that everyone went to work at a factory, except me, that is, who was considered the most promising; I won a place at a technical college..." recalled Natalia Petrovna with pleasure. "And I was both ashamed and proud to know that I was the only one to be selected from so many! And, in general, I began to think a great deal of myself. I decided I would become at least the director of a factory by the time I was thirty. Heaven knows why I was so self-confident! But in the third year I met my future husband... There were

mostly girls at our college so we made friends with the local army officers. The employment department which found us jobs when we graduated did its nut every year because all of us used to get married to servicemen... And so I celebrated my thirtieth birthday while we were living in the Chukotka Peninsula. I've never worked at a factory but fortunately we officers' wives were given the chance to train as nurses and..."

"So you're a qualified nurse?" the doctor interrupted her. "We'll soon have a vacancy at our hospital."

Sophia Kazimirovna knew that her husband did not like taking on servicemen's wives because they were there one minute and gone the next. But how horrible it was for them to be always on the move and never certain where they would be next! It was doubtful whether this talkative officer's wife would cope with the duties of a theatre sister but she would easily manage in the therapeutic or children's department. And what wonderful children she had! Her girl, who was Saulé's classmate, was delightful and even more so was the boy, Vitya. As is often the case with women who have not had boys, Sophia Kazimirovna had a soft spot for boys' hobbies and went into raptures over Vitya's fishes, cacti and stuffed animals. She promised to send him a scalpel which he needed badly to strip animal skins.

Who could have foreseen what a lot of trouble this scalpel would cause!..

After seeing the doctor to the door, Natalia Petrovna swept into Masha's room and said gaily,

"When you get better, you really must invite the local doctors' daughter round here."

"All right," replied Masha indifferently, "I'll do whatever you say."

Natalia Petrovna was dissatisfied with this reply.

"You've got into a strange habit recently of saying that and then doing everything your own way or, on the contrary, not doing anything at all."

Masha kept silent. It was hard for her to explain something to mother that she still had not worked out for herself, that is, how Saulé Dospayeva felt towards her.

Her mother liked to talk things out and get them clear although it probably wasn't always such a good idea to do so in a hurry. You could take life apart, bit by bit, as Vitya had done with the alarm-clock, and then put everything back together only to find that the clock had stopped ticking and refused to start again. Vitya was holding a tiny bit of metal and saying, "This piece won't fit anywhere."

The wind was beating against the window: by the morning the windowsill would be covered by a freezing layer of powdery snow. Here the snow was light and dry like desert sand and could penetrate the tiniest of cracks.

Masha looked out the window at the smoke rising from all the chimneys in the cantonment: it was as if the prefabricated houses were getting up steam and any moment now would chug off in some unknown direction.

Vitya had come back from school a long time ago. She worked out that if he had five lessons and her form had six and then, perhaps, had to attend a meeting, it was still high time for someone to come and visit her. But who would it be? Saulé Dospayeva? But suppose, Seraphima Gavrilovna had spitefully gone and said, "Yerkin, as you sit next to her, you should go!"

However, for some reason she was still taken by surprise when the door-bell rang and she hurriedly put all her medicines away, whipped a brush through

her hair, buttoned up the collar of her flannelette nightie and straightened her blanket... How simple it had been when her friends, Natasha and Sveta from her last school used to run round to see her! Who was at the door now? She didn't mind just as long as it wasn't Yerkin!

She heard her mother say joyfully, "Do come in. She'll be so pleased to see you." And then she added more loudly for Masha to hear, "Someone from school is here to see you!"

And there behind her mother was Saulé, no, Yerkin, no, Faridá, yes, Faridá with her shiny moles and nobody else.

Faridá began casually gazing round the room. None of the others had been round yet except Salman and he did not count. That meant Faridá was her first guest! What a horrible thought!

"I've brought you your homework. Saulé asked us who wanted to go and visit the new girl and, you see, I've been here before. I once brought some chocolates to Alik as a New Year present but he refused to take them because sweet things, he said, were bad for his teeth and I could help myself to them." Faridá explained everything in one breath. "Alik and I sat and drank tea and ate the whole box between us but that was ages ago when we were the fourth-formers. Nobody was friends with Alik—he was such a cry-baby! I can't stand boys who aren't brave. Who do you think is the bravest boy in our form? Akatov! For a dare he jumped off a roof last year and I told Yerkin to do the same but he wouldn't. Of course, why should he when everybody admires him as it is? You know, some wolves once attacked his flock when his father was away and Yerkin grabbed his gun, jumped onto his horse and rode off into the fog. Sholpan, you know, was in a terrible state—their flocks

always graze together in summer and their yurts always stand together, too. Yerkin's nephew ran over to her—he's from the town and isn't used to things here and frightened the life out of her. Sholpan rushed over to Isabek but Yerkin had already got back. A prize of fifty roubles is always awarded for killing a wolf and Yerkin spend all the money on a stop-watch to run with. Today he got top marks in history, three out of five for chemistry and nothing yet for physics. In our English lesson we were told to write a composition entitled 'My friend'. On the fifteenth we're going to have a chess tournament against the servicemen. Do you think you'll be better by then?"

Faridá's face was glowing and the tip of her nose became even more pointed.

"Yesterday morning a lorry came in from the part of the steppe where all the shepherds graze their flocks in winter. They graze them in the mountains, in summer, you know. Pasha Kolesnikov came to the station to pick up some planks and cement. Some of our class went along to see if he had brought them anything from home. Nurlan got nothing and he was livid because he's very fashion-conscious but his parents are real squares. Last time he sent their parcel back and with a message asking them to send him money instead so that he could buy everything himself. They were hurt and didn't send anything but Nurlan soon spent all he had on a pair of fashionable Czech trousers at the local store. In fact, he was forty-eight kopecks short and my Auntie Raya was kind enough to lend him the rest. He's very upset his parents have let him down... But Yerkin's dad sent him a lot. Pasha always spends the night at Yerkin's. He brought him some box-calf boots, a sheepskin coat and enough meat to last him the winter. I've

known for ages that his dad would be sending him meat because I'd heard people saying that Museké had killed a foal and his sister had made sausage meat and all sorts of other tasty things with its meat. She makes sausage meat better than anybody else in Chupchi, including my aunt Gulya who works out there in the shop, you know, the mobile shop. In summer she drives around the summer pastures and in winter, of course, can't go anywhere so she stays and does her trading in one place and her shop is just known as the mobile shop. In the winter settlement Auntie Gulya's got a small wooden house, just like the telegraph office and the surgery next door. And, you know, there used only to be a few shacks there but now a whole new village has been built! And all the houses have steam-heating and even a bath-house... And they're building more houses there and that's why Pasha's come for the planks—he's not a local lad, he's a soldier but his wife's from a place near here called Thaelmann. Nurlan's got an uncle in Thaelmann who's also very clever—everyone in his family is clever: his grandfather performed with our great poet and singer Djambul and Nurlan's got the instrument his grandfather used to play on, and it's meant to be worth a lot of money..." Faridá paused for breath. While she was about it, she might as well tell her everything about everyone, including herself. "I'm really mad about Akatov! He's the wittiest person in our class. I catch him sometimes giving me the weirdest of looks!.. Have you taken a fancy to any of the boys yet?"

"No ... not yet."

"Yerkin's clever, of course, one of his brothers is an academician and all the others have gone in for science, too. Have you seen Yerkin's pen? His elder brother sent it to him but Yerkin's not interested in

any of us girls. I was s-o m-u-c-h in love with him in the fifth form!" Faridá widened her eyes expressively. "But I wouldn't advise you to. It's such hell. Sholpan's head over heels in love with him but he never even looks at her at parties; I write to Nurlan every evening but, of course, I never sign my name because I want to keep him guessing... You and I are friends now, aren't we? Promise, you won't fall in love with Nurlan? You can have Kolya! They've got a new house: they finished building it last year. Kolya's sweet on Saulé, of course, but he doesn't have to be sweet on her all this year. Kolya's Russian, didn't you know that? A long time ago, during the Civil War, when his grandad was fighting against robber bands here, he swopped surnames with an Uzbek; he'd saved this Uzbek's life and that's why they swopped surnames. It's such a wonderfully heroic story; his dad's the best smith in Chupchi but I don't know what happened to the Uzbek. You can ask Kolya yourself—I'll bring him here tomorrow. I'll get Kolya and Nurlan to come along with me... All right? The three of us will come and maybe have a game of dominos if you like. Kolya loves playing. Are you any good?"

Masha hardly managed to get a word in sideways as Faridá went on chattering at full speed. Kolya Kudaibergenov called her a chatterbox but he himself hadn't bothered to come and see her. Nor had Saulé. And nobody else had agreed to go with Faridá.

"Do come tomorrow!" said Masha as Faridá was leaving. "And tell Nurlan and Kolya to, too."

"We're friends now, aren't we? Of course I'll come!"

In two months Masha had not found out as much about Chupchi as she had from Faridá in two hours. Whoever would have thought that Kolya Kudaibergenov, who was so ordinary-looking, could have such a fascinating family history? And as for Yerkín... All boys are boasts but he had never so much as dropped a hint about killing a wolf!..

In the late afternoon there was nobody else besides Masha in the apartment and it became so quiet that she could hear the water running through the radiators. All of a sudden someone turned the key in the front-door lock, opened the door and began stamping about in the hall. Who was it? Vitya? Masha crept barefooted across the room and peeped into the corridor. Salman was sitting on the floor and taking his shoes off. He glanced around nervously.

"Vitya sent me... To feed the fish."

There was something odd about Vitya's friend, Salman. Mind you, Vitya's friends were always odd. A certain Tolik used to come to their previous apartment and the only words anyone ever heard him say were, "Is Vitya at home?" and even these were said in a whisper. But whose idea had it been to put the hamster and his cage in the train compartment? Tolik's! Now Vitya and he had a scientific correspondence going. Vitya had even managed to send his friend a gopher while he was studying them in their natural habitat. He spends a lot of time roaming the steppe with Salman and putting thermometers down gopher-holes.

"Salman!" she called.

"What?" replied Salman unwillingly.

"I've just had a girl from our class round here."

"I know, Faridá," smirked Salman.

"What's so funny about that?" asked Masha sternly.

"She goes around writing 'F + N = LOVE' on walls."

"Have you seen her doing it?"

Salman shook his head.

"Then why tell tales?"

Salman stared hard at Masha and kept silent: he had said the wrong thing and had better keep his mouth shut. Perspiration broke out on his forehead as if he was hot but, in fact, Masha was sure, he was just being stubborn. She had once said to him, "Why do you always come and see us on your own? You've got brothers and sisters, haven't you? You could bring them along..." Salman disappeared for a week after that. And now he was silently standing there, and perspiring because he did not want to say anything. And he looked as if he was not there. What a strange fellow he was!

Fortunately, at that moment someone came to the Stepanovs' and pressed lightly on the bell: it wasn't Vitya or their mother but, more likely, a soldier from the division...

"Are you deaf?" asked Masha. "That was the door bell. Go and answer it!"

Salman smiled ironically, looked daggers at her and stalked off. She could not make out what was being said at the door but then heard a heavy sack being dragged along the corridor and into the kitchen. She decided not to ask who it was but let him tell her mother.

She made herself comfortable, drew the lamp closer and settled down to read *The Three Musketeers*. When Ryabov had heard she was sick, he had brought her five volumes of Dumas' works.

She had no idea how late it was. Her father was already home, Vitya was slopping about the apartment in his mother's dressing-gown, Salman had already

tramped off home and her mother had come back from the Korotuns'.

"How're things?" Her father took her book out of her hand and banged it shut. "Have you taken your temperature? You forgot to... Well, never mind. Let's ask Mummy. You'll put on some warm socks and a cardigan and come and drink tea with us."

Masha skipped through into the kitchen in her prickly thick socks. The Stepanovs had always enjoyed getting together in the kitchen in the evenings and this room was always cosier than the others in their flat.

"Do you want milk in yours?" asked her mother.

"Give her some milk and honey," advised her father.

"Mum..." drawled Vitya, "can I have a piece of horse meat?"

"But you were there when Salman told us that horse sausage-meat must first be boiled for two hours and only then cut into slices. I'm going to keep it for when I have guests and you can try some then."

"During the November celebrations?"*

"They're not that far off, you know!" said his mother firmly.

Masha could not make out what they were talking about.

Vitya kept on whining simply for fun,

"I don't want a rissole! I want to try the food that Genghis Khan's men ate!"

"Nevermind, you'll just have to wait..." insisted his mother.

Masha noticed a dark speckled sack tucked neatly away by the fridge. So that's where it was! Salman

* Celebrations of the October 1917 Revolution — November 7th (New Style).— *Ed.*

must have lugged it on his back across the corridor and into the kitchen after chatting to the person at the door.

Vitya guessed at once what she was looking at.

"Just look what it's tied with! Rope? No, its lasso! It's made not of hemp or jute but of animals' fur, no, not fur, I mean, well, a horse's tail, for instance..." Vitya then proceeded to tell them all sorts of interesting facts instead of explaining in plain and simple language how this sack had got here.

"Were asleep this afternoon, then?" her mother asked for some reason.

"She got carried away reading Dumas," laughed her father.

"Will someone, for heaven's sake, tell me how the sack got here!"

"Do you remember that old man who came to see us? That very nice local shepherd? He sent Daddy some sausage-meat, some oven-ready horse sausage-meat."

"Oven-ready, my foot!" scoffed Masha's know-all brother.

"But that boy told Salman to make sure we knew it must be boiled for two hours and on no account eaten raw. Of course it's only oven-ready."

Who had told Salman that?

"Yerkin, Museké's youngest son came round here," her father said. "He's in your class, isn't he?"

"That's right," Masha said in the same infuriatingly indifferent tone that Salman usually spoke in.

So, that horrible fellow, Salman, had opened the door to Yerkin but instead of calling Masha or at least letting her know who it was, he had chatted to him himself! Then he had taken the sack, as if he was in charge there, and seen Yerkin out without Masha, who was just round the corner, not even guessing

what was going on. Faridá had told her though that Yerkin had received a parcel from home so she might have guessed that Museké would send something for Colonel Stepanov. Museké was very thoughtful... Her father had given him some tea as a present... Of course, she should have been expecting a present from Museké but she had not realised this although Faridá had told her in time.

"Why didn't you come out and say hello to Yerkin?" asked her father sternly. "Especially as you're in the same form. When you get better, you'll have to put that right. He's a fine fellow. You know, he wants to be a shepherd like his father."

"Does he really do that badly at school?" asked her mother when she heard that someone in Masha's form had already decided to be a shepherd instead of continuing his studies after school.

"No, not at all!" retorted Masha, who felt offended for Yerkin. "He's very good at maths."

"I read somewhere that it was the Arabs who invented algebra," remarked Vitya, "and the Greeks who invented geometry... Is it true, Dad, that geometry is used a lot by farmers and builders? And that algebra and astronomy developed more quickly in the East where there were nomadic shepherds and traders' caravans?.."

"So you think the land was never cultivated here? On the contrary, highly advanced farming methods, including irrigation, were once used here. Archeologists have excavated a very old town with a network of irrigation canals two hundred or so kilometres away from here. Ask Ryabov, he's been there."

Masha squeezed out from behind the table and went off into her bedroom.

"Don't fall asleep!" her mother called after her. "I'll come and give you your medicine in a moment."

Masha burst into floods of tears.

"Goodness me, what's the matter with you?" asked her mother, taking Masha's temperature.

"Just what I thought. Thirty nine!"

Her father came in and switched off the light, "Sleep well, darling! You'll feel better in the morning."

* * *

That night the cantonment weighed anchor and set off on a long voyage round the country. Did the *aul* know that it sailed away from Chupchi every night until day-break? A chart of their long night voyage was written on the white-washed wall of the local electricity power-house. It was here that all the soldiers always wrote the names of their home-towns: Kostroma, Tula, Gorky, Yukhnov, Balakovo and so on... This had become a tradition and traditions in the army were always revered.

The cantonment sailed through the night, carrying with it dreams and insomnia, hopes and fears, joys and sorrows and the past and the future. And every night it covered immeasurable distances at a tremendous speed and then quietly came to rest at its mooring towards day-break.

When the first powdery snow fell, all the surrounding steppe became black and white and looked more like a landscape on another planet than somewhere on Earth. It was a nerve-racking experience for a stranger to these parts to travel a long distance across the even black and white steppe for the first time. This was especially true of young soldiers.

One day the colonel gave the school headmaster a lift home from the regional centre and on the way began speaking cautiously about the sharp contrasts

that existed in Chupchi about the black and white landscape, about how radio communication with the shepherds was up-to-date whereas there were no good roads in the steppe, and, finally, about how centuries-old nomadic sheep-raising was still practised here while fodder was now brought to the flocks by helicopter.

"You can add to your list one other discrepancy that exists here in the steppe," wheezed the headmaster, "that is, the difference between all your modern equipment, which is true scientific and technological achievement, and the old-fashioned way of life in a place such as our Chupchi." His huge wrinkled face broke into an ironic smile. "As for your equipment... Well, of course, it's a military secret but absolutely everybody in the *aul* down to the last little boy and old woman knows about it. Incidentally, our old folks are more inquisitive than children. That's another inconsistency, isn't it?" The headmaster coughed, which sounded more like laughing. "Our great poet Abai once wrote an eight-line riddle which goes like this...

*Eight mighty giants came together one day,
To fight and determine who might stay
First one got the better, then another did, too,
Who do you think was the one to come through?*

"That's the riddle, now here's the answer which is, after all, the most important part of the riddle...

*We thought long and hard and then did say:
First good and evil, then two seasons,
Then stronger than them we called night and day,
Then odd and even numbers, for many reasons."*

The colonel thought for a while and then said, "What a strange combination of giants! He's joined together conceptions of entirely different values: good and evil, night and day, odd and even numbers..."

"But that's how the mind works! The Orient loves symbols. We were the first abstract thinkers in the history of mankind. Just look at the patterns on our Kazakh carpets, if you don't believe me!"

"Patterns? Well, yes, I suppose so," said Stepanov slowly. "I saw a marvellous carpet in Museké's yurt. It had a very intricate black and white pattern but close-up you saw it was perfectly symmetrical with matching black and white backgrounds..."

"Sadvakasov's wife was a talented artist," replied the headmaster sadly. "I hoped that one of her children would become a poet but they've all taken after Kenjegali and gone in for exact sciences. A great mathematician once said of his pupil who was writing verse, 'He hasn't enough imagination to be a mathematician.' Perhaps the reverse is sometimes true? A person who doesn't have a sufficiently accurate vision of the world, cannot write poetry? After all, poetry requires the greatest precision as far as language is concerned, doesn't it? The scientist and the artist are also two giants, following two opposite paths in the quest for knowledge."

They drove for awhile in silence and then the headmaster said,

"Among the 19th century Russian poets I'm especially fond of Koltsov — he lived in the steppe and had a feeling for wide open spaces. I fought in the countryside near Voronezh where he came from..." He recovered his breath noisily. "Where are you from?"

"Bryansk."

"So you know the woods well. If you ask me, during the war the men from this steppe accomplished their greatest feat in the vast woods outside Moscow... Has Museké told you where he fought?"

"Yes, with Karpenko, near Moscow."

"He once complained to me that he still has dreams about being lost in the woods. You see, Museké didn't care for the beaten track. Why should he follow a winding road when he could go straight. So that is precisely what he did: he walked on and on all day and eventually came out by a winding railway line which he followed and then reached his destination very quickly. So, you see, that's sometimes true, too, isn't it?"

"Well, you certainly like talking in a roundabout way!" remarked Stepanov, laughing. "Perhaps it's because we're driving along such a straight road?"

"You see how artful I am!" replied the headmaster artlessly. "I know you wanted to ask me on the way about how your daughter was getting along. Right? And your son, too. But now we're drawing close to the *aul* and we haven't even touched the subject yet. All I'll have time to tell you is that your son's got a dangerous friend."

"It's up to Vitya to choose his own friends."

"Good! I like your answer," wheezed the headmaster. "Our head-teacher has great hopes in Vitya. He's a very good influence on Salman Mazitov. I'm most grateful to you for the ride."

The jeep rocked under his weight as he got out.

At the last moment he decided not to tell the colonel about Seraphima Gavrilovna's suspicions concerning Mazitov, namely, that he was involved in the business with the stolen fur.

As he was drawing near Chupchi in the army jeep, for some reason the headmaster suddenly be-

came certain that it wasn't Mazitov. This conviction came to him as a result of his philosophical conversation with the father of restless Masha and gentle-natured Vitya, who was friends with the toughest knob in Chupchi, Salman Mazitov.

Akhmetov had come to the conclusion long ago that more often than not one finds the truth where one least expects to.

CHAPTER FOUR

Salman was only lazy and slow at school. The rest of the time he was sharp-witted and even hard-working. His teachers had no idea of his outstanding talents although they might have guessed that a stupid lazy-bones would have perished long ago in the conditions which Salman lived in. He, on the contrary, managed splendidly.

Systematically arranged knowledge gives a man strength. Salman knew how many sheep were brought to market on Sundays and who sold them himself and who used a dealer. He also knew that Aminá was dating a dark-haired soldier called Lyovka and that it was Faridá who was going about writing "F + N = LOVE" and it was she who had written things about Kolya, too...

Salman knew many things which other people would not find out for quite awhile. He had peeped through the window and eavesdropped on the teachers' meeting and learnt that they thought his friendship with Vitya Stepanov was very good for him.

Vitya never got low or even average marks and was much better at botany than his teacher. However, he cared most for Salman. And that was why

Vitya could be forgiven his weak character. It was Salman who killed all the lizards, birds and mice, which were to be stuffed, while Vitya stood by and closed his eyes and blocked his ears. But he had to give Vitya his due: he was certainly a past master at skinning a mouse or a bird with the scalpel that Sophia Kazimirovna had given him. Salman always kept this delightful article in his pocket so that Vitya did not lose it.

They made a lot of stuffed animals and birds that autumn. It gave Salman little pleasure to drag the stuffed creature on a lacquered stand to school. He knew that if they made the effort, they could easily sell them but Vitya gave his away as presents with the following inscription: "Made by S. Mazitov and V. Stepanov, the fifth B form."

Salman had never been invited to the cantonment before but now he was always welcome. Vitya's father was kind and his mother was quite generous and his sister realised that Salman was a true and reliable friend to her younger brother. She had stroked his head and said, "You've got very coarse hair. You're not nasty, are you?" But then she had been furious with him for not letting Yerkin in to see her. Salman was rather afraid of her. He wasn't afraid of anybody else, even the Head and Seraphima Gavrilovna but he would break out into a cold sweat whenever Vitya's elder sister was around. He knew he had to protect his friend's sister because that friend of his was a weakling: he might be good in class but he was hopeless as far as everything else in life was concerned. Salman had tested this out many times.

They had recently spent an evening sitting by the aquarium. They had turned out the lamp, switched on the light in the green water and enjoyed watching

the little fishes swimming slowly about. Vitya's sister had come in and sat down next to them on the sofa and told them how as a little girl she had once caught a bird with her bare hands. Some laundry had been boiling in a cauldron and a bird had landed on its wooden lid and almost toppled into the flames. They were living in Musab then... Then Vitya began recalling how, as a little boy, he had lost his way in some grass, which was taller than him, and how he had waded on without being able to see anything. And Masha had said, "I remember! It was maize and not grass that you got lost in. We spent half a day looking for you..." Then they began recalling how their father and a captain had got carried out to sea on an ice floe. They recalled their Uncle Lyosha. Their father had been still a boy when the war broke out. At the age of twelve his parents and he had been executed by the nazis and Uncle Lyosha had dragged him out alive from among the dead in the pit. First of all, Uncle Lyosha had got his regiment to look after the boy and then he had taken him to a military college, got demobbed and found work as an agronomist. He had not been killed in battle but had eventually died of his war wounds, for a shell-splinter remained lodged in his body after the war. He had died so long ago that Vitya only remembered him vaguely for he had been very small at the time but his sister remembered him quite well. She said that she remembered how Uncle Lyosha once heard the expression, "When pears start growing on pussy-willows!" to mean that something would *never* happen and to prove this was wrong, he had grafted a pear branch to a pussy-willow growing under his window. Vitya's sister had tried the pears from the willow but they were very sour...

They had had a lovely time sitting there while

Vitya and his sister recalled various things but then they had quarrelled over which sea was bluer, the Bering or the Black Sea. Vitya was even-tempered and kind but weak. With a father like his, Vitya could dress really smartly but he chose to slop about the flat in a dressing-gown because, as he put in, "he was living in the desert." He wouldn't be any good at defending his sister. Salman did not yet know who and what he would be defending Vitya's sister from and, indeed, you could have excused anyone else for not knowing except Salman. It was his job to keep his eye out and smell a rat. Otherwise what sort of friend was he to Vitya? He had not let Sadvakasov in and he had been right not to. He knew he shouldn't let him in because he was a dangerous, callous fellow.

Salman guessed that Saulé Dospayeva was also an enemy of Vitya's sister. In this instance Salman wanted to outwit himself. You see, he knew that people sometimes took an instant disliking to one another, like he had to Vitya, and then became really good friends. This initial antipathy acted as a kind of glue to bind the friendship. Now, Salman did not want Vitya's sister to be friends with Saulé. His family did not like the Dospayevs. "If I was in Dospayev's shoes..." his father would hiss scornfully.

Salman never let a chance slip by to play a mean trick on Saulé. He knew that Saulé was never petty-minded. Salman would put an end to that! He was very good at playing the most ridiculous little pranks and with his childish vindictiveness he knew how to humiliate Saulé by forcing her to bear petty grudges. Once he noticed she was staring at him and he felt chuffed, as if he had found a bank note on the ground, because, it seemed, before Saulé never even been aware of his existence.

The headmaster saw him in the yard and stopped him,

"How are things, Mazitov? What's the latest news?" The wrinkles on his large face expressed the greatest of curiosity as if all Mazitov ever did was provide the headmaster with interesting news.

Salman's mouth closed like a clam.

The headmaster's wrinkled face assumed a sad expression.

"You're a clever fellow, Mazitov, a very clever fellow. But what good does it do you? None at all. That's true, isn't it?"

Salman was not taken in by the headmaster. He gaped and kept silent.

"I'm going away for a week, Mazitov. I hope nothing will happen in my absence? Can you vouch for that?"

"Yes," muttered Salman, unclenching his jaws. What was there in a promise? That was what school was all about: promising a lot and giving nothing. Salman thought a lot about what the Head was expecting him to do but could not find an answer. Sometimes he grew alarmed because it appeared the Head could see something that he couldn't and he Salman, might easily be very wide of the mark.

* * *

Faridá brought Kolya and Nurlan along to visit Masha. Kolya acted very nervously and Nurlan, who was dressed in a rather shoddy white raincoat, which was very fashionable, to make up for it, said politely to Masha's mother,

"Oh, how very much I've been looking forward to the pleasure of making your acquaintance! How do you do?"

Natalia Petrovna was so taken aback by his ridiculously pompous manner that she only came to her senses back in the kitchen and decided that she could hardly expect anything else from an eighth-former who had spent all his life in a small village as Chupchi.

Nurlan had brought his guitar along. How he had come by it was quite another story... In the local store he had once noticed a confident-looking young soldier buying a Chinese vase on a black wooden base. The young assistant, Raya, Faridá's aunt, was giggling and making eyes at the soldier who for some unearthly reason started giving her a long lecture on the ancient art of enamel and on the difference between Byzantine and Chinese enamel work. While he was talking, he gave Nurlan a look as if to say that he might have something to speak to him about. They left the shop together and the soldier turned to Nurlan and said,

"How about helping me get some antique things made by local craftsmen?.."

Nurlan remembered his grandfather's *dombra** languishing on the wall of Uncle Otarbek's house in Thaelmann.

"Why not sell it me?" suggested the soldier who was called Volodya. "Or if you like we could do a swop? I've got a guitar, which is a very popular instrument these days."

In exchange for the old instrument Volodya not only gave Nurlan his guitar but also sang him all the latest hits. Nurlan turned out to be amazingly good at mimicry and soon got the hang of things and even learnt to imitate his way of playing. And when he accompanied himself on the old *dombra*, he showed Volodya that he could sing in a completely

* *Dombra* — Kazakh folk instrument similar to a mandolin.— *Ed.*

different way, in a high-pitched vibrant voice which sounded like a long cry. However, what amazed Volodya most was that the boy sang all the usual boring songs in a deeply moving way.

Nurlan gave a most spectacular performance at the Stepanovs. Masha's father and a bald-headed major came in to listen to him and Nurlan noticed that the colonel was enjoying his singing and that the major was absolutely thrilled by it. Then Masha's father went out quietly and the major stayed on with the youngsters. Nurlan would have gone on forever if the major had not stretched out his arm and said, "Let me have a go."

Korotun spent a long time tuning the guitar, plucking the strings and bending his head closer to listen to the sound. Then he raised his eyebrows with an air of long suffering and began singing a sad song.

Korotun did not have a good voice but he obviously thought he sang wonderfully well and, what mattered most, put his heart and soul into it. The song about the war took him back to his far-off youth as a young lieutenant with a dashing moustache, wearing a dandyish cap and boots with spurs.

Masha felt sorry for him because he did not realise how ridiculous he was. On the other hand, Nurlan, who was an artiste and knew how to put on an act, sat perfectly still as if spellbound by the marvellous singing.

Korotun seemed about to sing something else but Faridá quickly stuck out one of her red boots, waggled it about admiringly and asked in an innocent voice,

"Hey, Masha... You wanted to ask Kolya about his grandad, didn't you? Go on, Kolya, do tell us!"

"What's there to tell..." muttered Kolya shyly.

"Well, I won't get in your way!" Korotun guessed that it was time he left.

To Faridá's dismay, Nurlan seemed to be annoyed with her for getting rid of the tone-deaf major. She at once regretted what she had done and marvelling at how sensitive Nurlan was, said aloud,

"But maybe it's time we were off, too? We've bored you stiff."

"Not at all," said Masha. "It's boring being on my own all day long."

"I'd love to live alone," said Kolya enviously. "I never get a moment's peace at home. All my younger brothers and sisters always get in my way... Yesterday I turned my back for a second only to find they'd done off with the soldering iron and were drawing pictures on the wardrobe with it. And who got a thick ear from Granny? Yours truly!" He was sitting at Masha's writing table, fiddling with her alarm-clock and trying to work out where Vitya's "spare" part went. "And last winter they shaved our dog, Kurban. I was mending the hair-clippers and they went and nicked them. It was getting frosty and our dog was running about with half his winter coat shaved off. What could we do?! We ended up sewing him a sheepskin jacket."

Nurlan began plucking the strings of his guitar,

"Stop fiddling with that thing and tell us about your family."

"Oh, Faridá, you're always gossiping! You're such a chatterbox!" muttered Kolya, screwing the winder on. "Now let's see if it will work." He turned the winder as many times as it would go, put the alarm-clock to his ear and began smiling happily. "It's ticking! I say, it really is! Now let's try the bell." He turned the other winder. "What use is an alarm-clock if it's alarm doesn't work!" He listened anxiously, set the hands and the clock in his hands suddenly began ringing at an ear-piercing pitch. "Gosh, that's

loud!" said Kolya appreciatively. "It's as rowdy as Granny's rooster!" He put the mended clock on Masha's bedside table for her to look at.

"You're a genius!"

Thanks to Kolya the clock was now keeping time very well.

"That was chicken's feed!" said Kolya, waving his hand dismissingly.

"What did I tell you!" Faridá chimed in. "I've always said that Kolya's got a knack with gadgets. Nurlan's good at music and Kolya's good with his hands."

Kolya began to look bored. He had enjoyed putting the clock together but didn't like being thanked and praised for being clever with his hands. If he had been given something else to fiddle with, he would have done so with pleasure but without saying a word, Nurlan went on strumming loudly, "Tell-us-about-your-grand-ad, tell-us-about-your-grand-ad..." That devil Rusty Nail had taught his guitar to speak!

"Why don't you! You've heard the story from grandad hundreds of times!"

"All right, I will then!" replied Nurlan enthusiastically. "If you like... If you like... I'll write a song about it!"

Nurlan ran his fingers nonchalantly over the strings and at once turned into a Red cavalry man in a peaked helmet.

Nurlan found any role simple and easy to act because he was good at imitating facial expressions, gaits and manners of speech. But who would tell him how to act himself, Nurlan Akatov? Faridá? She looked absolutely thrilled and gazed adoringly at him. "F + N = LOVE": he still hadn't found out who had been writing that rubbish all over the *aul*.

A week later somebody had written on the white-

washed wall of the one-storey *aul* club, "Kolya K. should love with his heart and not with his eyes!" Kolya personally rubbed some moist clay over this first sign of female interest in his person and attack on Saulé. As he was about it he filled in all the cracks on the club wall so that the bucket of clay wasn't wasted!

When he came over to the Stepanovs with Nurlan, Kolya was not in the least interested in looking at the aquarium although he had once helped Vitya fix the underwater lighting. You see, ever since a very small boy, he had preferred real things to toys.

Pretending he wished to share his love of the guitar and singing, Nurlan made friends with Korotun.

On her return to school, Masha was already considered as Faridá's friend and, despite the two weeks' absence, this defined her position in the class as far as all the relationships between its members were concerned. She knew that her trial period was over and that she was now playing the game but how it would go from there, she had no idea.

...Kazakh children come of age at fifteen.

You're already fourteen — you're not little any more!.. You're only fourteen — why have you started thinking so much of yourself?! You're fourteen — it's time you were self-reliant!.. You're fourteen, aren't you? Who wants to hear your opinion?...

At fourteen you find yourself in no-man's-land. It's just as if you are in a ploughed field and every step you take leaves a footprint in the ground. Masha's father had once told her what the border was like: it was a neutral zone covered with crumbly earth. She could not remember exactly when he had told her about it but she knew it was very long ago when they were still living in Musab. She remembered the cramped little courtyard they lived in: and its clay

walls and in the middle of it stood a bonfire and cauldron containing boiling laundry. Masha was drawn towards the fire and stood stoking the coals under the cauldron and sniffed the raw smell of smoke which tickled her nose. And then all of a sudden she spotted a bird with bright-coloured feathers, a mottled brown and white cop and a long beak. If it hadn't been petrified by the stinging soapy steam, it would certainly not have let itself be captured by the little girl. And if she had been older, Masha would hardly have tried to catch the bird with her bare hands. You can't catch a bird like that! You have to use a net or a trap of some sort. However, Masha did not know that then. She simply reached across the stinging smoke and clasped the hoopoe bird under its wings. If she had not been standing close, the bird, which had been paralyzed by the steam, might quite easily have slipped into the boiling water or onto the smoking coals... Yes, a lot of smoke was bellowing out from under the cauldron and its smell was so special and so ticklish that you could never forget it. When Yerkin had sat down next to her for the first time, his jacket had smelt faintly of smoke, reminding her of that smoky hearth in Musab. Masha remembered running with the hoopoe in her hands towards the terrace which encircled the house. Then she tripped as she ran round a bend, banging against the cracked clay and the hoopoe broke free, landed on the railings for a moment to get back its senses and then flew off and that was the last she ever saw of it. Hearing her howls, her father ran up and after listening to her description of the bird between her sobs, said that the long-beaked mottled bird was called a hoopoe.

Masha had been little when they lived in Musab but now she was fourteen, she would no longer try to

catch a bird with her bare hands and unwittingly save an innocent victim.

Masha was already fourteen but, at the same time, she was still only fourteen. She was walking through no-man's-land with her childhood on one side and her adulthood on the other. She had left one behind but had not yet reached the other and was now walking along and not across a strip of ploughed land, leaving a deep footprint after every step.

Why is adolescence meant to be the frankest and most spontaneous time of one's life? Fourteen-year-olds will tell you that all their movements are restrained and their vanity is hypersensitive. At fourteen you neither understand what you're like at the present nor, of course, what you'll be like in the future. You begin inventing an entirely new identity for yourself and only you are responsible for choosing this identity.

The more a person fantasises about himself, the less he remembers about himself later on. That is why everybody has vivid memories of early childhood but only a few remember what they were like at fourteen. A lot of things that happen before sixteen disappear or dissolve like smoke.

CHAPTER FIVE

Sholpan was awoken in the middle of the night by the sound of someone crying in the dormitory.

There had been times when she, too, had cried into her wet pillow. In the dormitory at night you could cry without being seen or disturbed and give vent to your feeling of resentment or homesickness or whatever it was that had caused you to cry. You could not be seen in the dark and so did not feel inhibited. Was

it really possible to feel any lonelier than on your flat boarding-house pillow? When you went off by yourself into the steppe to be on your own, you could never say you were lonely — you were simply alone. Sometimes you needed to be alone to think things over undisturbed. But loneliness is something quite different: loneliness is being surrounded by people who have nothing in common with you.

It was Aminá crying and Sholpan could not very well get up and go over to her because Aminá probably hoped that everyone else was asleep and could not hear her.

Everyone in the boarding-house knew that Aminá had stopped going out with her soldier boyfriend, Lyovka Kacharyan: his mother had written to say that she did not want to know of any other fiancée besides the one waiting for him at home.

Isabek was delighted by the news and rushed over and called her into the corridor but she stormed back in anger a moment later. She didn't need the champion Isabek, she needed Lyovka!

Sholpan listened to her sobs and told herself to go to sleep. She lay face downwards and pulled the blanket over her head.

But the stifled sobs prevented her from dropping off. She got up silently and ran barefooted across to Aminá's bed in the other corner of the room.

Aminá seemed to have been waiting for her: she threw off her blanket and, shaking with sobs, embraced Sholpan.

That summer in the mountain pastures some of the old women had shouted jokingly after Aminá, "What a fine filly! Who's bridling her?" The old women from the *aul* simply loved playing naughty tricks whenever they got the chance and they now could do what they pleased for they had nothing to lose.

If you looked closely at Aminá's face you wouldn't say that there was anything particularly striking about her eyes, nose or lips but as a whole, she was a lovely-looking girl and you could not help admiring her. Everything in her seemed to be alive and longing to be set free in the boundless steppe under a blue sky. And it wasn't offensive to compare her to a sleek young filly frolicking in her herd. But all of a sudden she changed completely and began walking about in a daze.

Sholpan slipped under her blanket, hugged Aminá to her delicate ribs and felt the deep sorrow flooding through Aminá's large strong body. Then she put her hand on Aminá's shuddering, hot shoulder and Aminá's sobs died away as she slowly fell asleep...

Before she was eight, Sholpan never went outside her *aul* and the only language she heard and spoke was her native one, Kazakh. Everything was expressed in Kazakh: the movement of hands combing hair or kneading dough and the stubbornness with which she left home for the boarding-house every year and with which she sat up at night to read when everybody else in the room was asleep. Sholpan would imagine herself talking to Yerkin in Kazakh. She would meet him in the distant future when he came back from somewhere far off, exhausted and his face flushed by the wind. She would take his frozen fleecy sheepskin coat from him, sit down on the rug and help him pull off his fur boots as he was too cold to do so unassisted.

When she started school, however, Russian also became very important for her. She soon needed Russian words to express many natural gestures and actions. For several years now the girls had been

taught housekeeping by a re-engaged Ukrainian sergeant-major's wife, who had been born and brought up in Siberia. And so whenever she sewed herself a dress or changed the starched white collar on Aksar's school jacket or peeled the thin skin of a potato, Sholpan imagined her teacher speaking to her in that Siberian-Ukrainian dialect of hers.

Sholpan also learnt the Polish words for simple things and actions in Saulé's old house where there were books which Saulé's Polish great-great-grandfather had brought from his homeland and others, which had been ordered by her great-grandfather from Warsaw and Cracow. Over the years, however, the family had gradually forgotten spoken Polish because there was nothing to keep it alive in Chupchi and now they only spoke it at home when they were discussing something very simple. Saulé was very fond of the Polish words her mother had taught her as a child, not only because they reminded her so much of home but also because they kept alive the memory of their worthy forebears who had led such honest and just lives.

During the holidays Saulé and Sholpan and the rest of their class went on an excursion to Alma-Ata where they were shown round by a very strict female guide who crammed their ears so full of new information that Sholpan wondered how she would ever remember it all without jotting it down. In the large city many new and interesting things flew past her without letting her near or even pushing her angrily away as if she had no right to them but she did not mind.

When she returned home she again saw many things she was used to in a new light. This often happens in childhood when you get up after a long illness and learn all over again to see the world you

knew so well. A long illness is also like a journey into another life.

Sholpan began thinking about how it was high time for her to decide for the future what mattered most to her in life. Otherwise, she might lose her way in the big wide world, just as one sometimes does in the steppe when one cannot see the sun or the stars. However, she could not decide where to start looking because she was not looking for something she already knew and had lost but for something entirely new. As she was lacking in experience, she was afraid she might simply pass it by. What did matter most to her? She often pondered over this unknown entity and knew it had a name which she would one day find out and use in her everyday life.

When she and her classmates were returning home on the train from Alma-Ata, she suddenly caught sight of herself at a small railway station. She was standing by a crossing, dressed in a little plush coat and a tasselled shawl, and was carrying a little bucket covered with a brightly-coloured cloth. What could she be carrying in the bucket?

How strange it was, she thought to herself, that here she was standing by the dusty carriage window, wondering what she herself was carrying in the little tin bucket with the creaking handle, which, she knew, was not so very heavy because she could feel it in her hand.

The little girl in the little plush coat remained by the crossing while Sholpan went speeding past. Saulé, who was standing by the window next to her, hugged her and rubbed her cheek against hers.

"Isn't this wonderful!" she exclaimed.

Had Saulé said that in Kazakh or Russian? Sholpan had not noticed and, anyway, what difference did it make? It was simply wonderful in any language!

Kolya, who was hovering by the next window, looked sideways at them when nobody was watching.

The same year as Kolya started at school, a young teacher, who was a complete stranger to the area, began teaching in Chupchi.

"Kudaibergenov, which class are you supposed to be in — the Kazakh or the Russian one? Which did your parents tell you to join?" the new teacher asked Kolya.

Kolya had been taught always to be self-reliant but did not know what to say in this instance. And at that moment in came Seraphima Gavrilovna, whom the older children had told Kolya awful stories about.

"Put him down in One B!" she said and began explaining there and then to the new teacher that a Russian family called Kudaibergenov lived in Chupchi and that during the Civil War a Cossack by the name of Fetisov from Semirechensk had exchanged surnames with an Uzbek by the name of Kudaibergenov.

Kolya had already heard this old family story about how his grandfather had saved a fellow Uzbek soldier and how they had decided to exchange surnames. "It's hard to swop boots," his grandfather had told him, "because people's feet are different sizes. The same's true of coats. You can't swop first names because they were given to you by your mother. But there's nothing to stop you swopping surnames. And so we decided to swop ours. He answered for me at roll-calls and I answered for him. It caused a lot of confusion in the regiment at first but as we had roll-calls every day, everyone soon got the hang of it and as the list of men in the regiment remained the same,

they would call out after roll-calls that there were no changes and that every man was present..."

After his first day at school as a member of Russian class One B, Kolya again asked his grandfather whether his life had changed after swopping surnames. It appeared, Kolya was conservative by nature and did not like changes: he wanted his grandfather to assure him that nothing had or could happen when someone changed his surname.

However, his grandfather saw through him in a trice.

"You little devil... You don't want anything to change. But how's that possible! If me and my mate swopped surnames, that means we swopped fates, too. And that's how it was he, Fetisov, was killed by bandits, damn them."

Then he lapsed into a grim silence and Kolya spent ages trying to make him describe the death of the other man who was killed instead of Kolya's grandfather because he had taken Kolya's grandfather's surname. After much persuasion, his grandfather finally gave in and said,

"Well, you see, I got demobbed while he was still serving in the cavalry brigade under Karpenko. In 1930 the *basmachis* banded reared their ugly heads again and Karpenko drove them beyond the River Chu into the Kirghiz mountains. And it was in these mountains that Fetisov got captured by the bandits. They used torture to make him talk, as they usually did, and their leader asked him what his name was and what plans his command had in mind. It was obvious what they were after. But my mate kept his mouth shut all the time. Then, as he was Asiatic like the rest of them, they tried to win him over by saying, 'You're one of us, you're a Muslim.' But my mate replied, 'No, I'm not, I'm from the Red cavalry and my

name's Fetisov.' Afterwards a bandit, who'd been captured by our lot, described everything as it happened. One of them shouted at him, 'You're lying! You're not Russian! You're a Muslim!' But he stuck to his story and said, 'You've got my document, you bastard! Use your eyes! Can't you see "Fetisov" written in it?' The bandits were jabbing knives into him but he kept on shouting, 'I've got no other name and never will have! My name's Fetisov and that's that!'" Kolya's grandfather hung his head and wiped the tears off his cheeks. "That's how Fetisov met his heroic death. When some cavalymen found his mutilated body, his chest had knife wounds all over it, his eyes had been gouged out and his tongue cut off. He was buried in the same spot, in the Kirghiz mountains and the inscription on his stone read: 'Red Army man Fetisov. Brutally murdered by bandits. Rest in peace, comrade, we have taken vengeance for you.' I've heard the stone's standing on the roadside to this day. And people going by stop and read it and feel sorry for the Russian fellow who lost his life so far away from home... How could you wish that nothing ever changed? No, that could never be. Sometimes I can't sleep at night because the gravestone seems to be pressing down on my chest..."

The way his grandfather had put it, it seemed Kolya was not living his own life but that of the Red Army man's grandson who would have been born into an Uzbek household. His grandmother said angrily, "What are you being so difficult for? Why are you telling the little lad all that for?" But you couldn't muddle Kolya. After giving some serious thought to the matter, he decided that he should take life as it came and learn to accept that Kudaibergenov and Fetisov were both quite satisfactory surnames.

When the Kovalenkos and their son, Vanya arrived at the cantonment in the Chukotka Peninsula, Masha was already in her second year at school. "Kovalenko," called the teacher, "Kovalenko, Vanya, what nationality are you?"

"I don't know," replied Vanya, jumping up.

"Ask your parents then and tell me tomorrow."

The teacher asked several of the other pupils the same question but Masha was not among them and she could not understand why.

"You've got a typically Russian surname," her father explained. "There was no reason for her to ask. But Kovalenko's a Ukrainian surname but some Russians are called that, too. That's why she asked Vanya in school."

Afterwards Masha had no trouble whatsoever remembering that Stepanov was a typically Russian surname and that if anyone ever asked her what her nationality was, she had to say, "Russian". However, she was never asked because her surname was Stepanova and her first name, Masha, was even more typically Russian. She wondered if there was anywhere far away in the world where plain and simple things of this sort were not known and where she might be asked one day what her nationality was. Up till then however, she had not been far enough away to find out.

"You've done a lot of travelling in your time," the headmaster once said to her. "You come from a nomadic tribe like us."

The headmaster taught Russian and Kazakh. One day he gave Nurlan three out of five and Masha a top mark for a Kazakh language test. She caught him up in the corridor once and said,

"Please don't give me full marks again."

He frowned annoyedly and asked,

"You don't think I give you full marks because your father's a colonel, do you? No, I give marks for good work. For someone who didn't know a single word of Kazakh, you're doing very well. For instance, you got all the case inflexions right today. Your next-door neighbour's probably a great help to you." His wrinkles became smoother. "I noticed when you were writing a Russian dictation, you held your exercise-book in such a way that Sadvakasov could see everything but he didn't start copying off you because that's the way he's made. He usually gets four out of five for Russian as you did for your first Russian dictation. You're probably not used to my voice yet?"

"No, I used to get the same mark at my last school."

"That's a favourite mark among teachers. Nowadays full marks for Russian dictations are very rarely given, even in Russia. Only Lyuda Vlasenko gets full marks in the tenth form. Nobody does in the ninth and in your class Lyuda's sister, Valya, often gets three out of five. So, that's the way it goes... Saulé Dospayeva's the only one to get full marks. Akatov always gets three of five for both Kazakh and Russian language tests, it makes no difference which. He may have the gift of the gab but he certainly doesn't understand much. Now, Kudai-bergenov genuinely deserves the four of five he gets for Russian and Kazakh. Your neighbour usually gets four out of five, too. Our pupils may get three out of five for history and full marks for geometry in their reports but they always get the same mark for both Russian and Kazakh language." The headmaster walked along the corridor with Masha

behind him. "Ever since my childhood I've been bilingual in Russian and Kazakh, Masha. And these two languages have had a stabilising effect on my life. I studied at the Russian language and literature faculty of Leningrad University. Anywhere else people would have been amazed that a Kazakh spoke such perfect Russian, anywhere, that is, except Leningrad. We Kazakhs are especially fond of that city. It was there that our first scientist, Chokan Valikhanov, became famous and that our best writer, Mukhtar Auezov, completed his studies. You've still got to learn about them. There's a lot you've still got to learn about us Kazakhs..." The headmaster stopped in front of the photograph of an old woman with a dark-complexioned face and prominent cheekbones, who was in the traditional white turban old Kazakh women usually wore. "Look here. This is the famous composer, Mariam Jagor. She was already old when this photo was taken. But when she was young she had another name. You see, she's Russian and her name's Masha, the same as yours and her father's name is Yegor. She fell in love with a young Kazakh and wrote a song about her love entitled, 'Dudarai'. It's now sung all over the steppe... For a long time Kazakhs, Russians and Ukrainians have lived in a very close-knit community here in the steppe, Mariam. That is how history meant it to be here. The people who have grown up here have never drunk out of separate wells. A person who has grown up here, whether he's Kazakh, Russian or Ukrainian, acquires various characteristic features which one will most likely not meet anywhere else. Try and understand things here for as you're new, you should find everything particularly easy to spot."

The old composer gazed down from the photograph

with her wise, far-seeing eyes, as if asking, "Well, Mariam?" Both she and old Museké had the same sharp-sighted eyes of steppe birds.

At the next school concert while Nurlan accompanied himself on a dombra and sang Mariam Jagor's love-song, he looked at Masha and laughed with his blue eyes. My, thought Masha, what a showman you are!..

Nurlan was about four when his father's brother, Uncle Otarbek, decided to tell him about the renowned Buguchi family who gave the steppe the great musician and poet Sadyk. All that Nurlan could remember afterwards was that there was the Buguchis, on the one hand, and there were the non-Buguchis who were always worse, on the other. Nurlan's father was from the Buguchi family and his mother was from the Mingitai. Uncle Otarbek smiled wryly whenever he spoke of Nurlan's mother's family and Nurlan was pleased that he looked very like a Buguchi and not a Mingitai.

Uncle Otarbek made him learn seven generations of his family tree, and Nurlan knew he was the son of Kumar and that Kumar was the son of great Sadyk, and Sadyk, the son of Akat, the son of Nurgali, and Nurgali, the son of Amantai, and so on... Uncle Otarbek also drummed it into his head that from time immemorial all the land around Chupchi had belonged to the Buguchis. Their history teacher, however, told them that all the local lands were owned by Yerjan Akpayev, a sultan, who had managed with great difficulty to join the ranks of the Russian nobility.

At around five Nurlan found out that his hair was ginger! You see, whenever his father had shaved

his head, Nurlan had noticed rusty-coloured little hairs stuck to the razor but his father's hair was the same colour. Like everything else he had been used to since birth, the colour of his hair had always seemed unimportant. Then one day at the very beginning of spring Nurlan went out to play with the other lads, snatched his cap off his perspiring head and chucked it into the sky. All of a sudden his friends started shouting, "Ginger! Ginger!" He took fright, pulled his cap over his eyes and ran away home. He at once asked his mother if he was ginger and she replied, "No, you're not ginger, you're a Kazakh with fair hair." Thus he learnt that the Buguchis and the Mingitais and the people from many other steppe families were, as a whole, known as Kazakhs. And that meant he, Nurlan Akatov, son of Kumar, was too. He was a Kazakh with fair hair.

That same year he and his family moved from the *aul* to Chupchi where his father got a job at the station and bought a tumbledown shack that was going for a song in Railway Street. Anyone visiting Chupchi from their *aul*, whether they were Buguchis or not, got into the habit of staying at Kumar's and there was nothing Nurlan's family could do but welcome them all because that was what Kazakh hospitality was all about. Nurlan's mother would cook for her guests while her children ran wildly about in the street. It was there that Nurlan made friends with a young boy called Kolya who lived next door.

Kumar chopped and changed jobs for just over a year and then went back to live in his *aul*. When he started school, Nurlan, as a shepherd's son, was automatically given a place at the boarding-house with all his expenses paid by the state. After his stay in Chupchi he spoke Russian splendidly and

that was why he ended up in Russian One B. Nurlan was a born mimic.

Whenever Kolya's exasperated grandmother needed placating, Nurlan would get out his grandfather's accordion and start singing a sentimental song in a drawling voice and she would at once forgive Nurlan and Kolya everything, even the inkspots on the oil-cloth and the hole in Kolya's trousers.

The major would also wipe away a tear as he listened to Nurlan singing. The son of Kumar and grandson of Sadyk enjoyed visiting the cantonment. Everyone thought he was going to the Stepanovs whereas, in fact, he was visiting the bald-headed major. The latter's wife would open the door and call into the flat, "Your chum's here!"

Nurlan would walk through to the major, sit down next to him on the sofa and sing old war songs to him...

If a good song made the major cry, Nurlan did not mind coming back and sitting with him on the sofa and singing to him...

The following Saturday Auntie Nasket told Nurlan to take Askar and three other first-formers to the bathhouse. In the changing-room Nurlan handed each of his wards a piece of soap and a wisp of bast, pushed them into the steamy shower-room among the clanking taps and hissing water and disappeared. The boys got completely lost in the steam and noise of the bathhouse.

Yerkin had once been terrified by the crowded noisy bathhouse but now he enjoyed having a steam-bath and beating himself with birch branches. When he felt ready, he staggered out of the white

hot steam and in the terrible commotion stumbled across four naked little boys huddled tightly together. They looked scared stiff and had obviously not washed because they were still clutching the bars of soap and wisps of bast in their hands and by the way they were shivering, he could tell they had been there for quite some time. He realised they were boarders by the expression in their eyes. The local youngsters always looked boldly and knowingly at you but these four boys looked completely innocent and defenseless.

How gratefully they looked at him! It was as if he had saved them from a fate worse than death! However, after he had doused each of them with warm water and lathered their heads with soap, they proved not to be as timid as they looked, and were soon frolicking about like colts in clover, scrubbing each other's backs, throwing water over each other and running in and out the shower. And now that they were shiny and clean, they did not even want to leave. In the changing-room Yerkin quickly found their conspicuous regulation coats, dressed all of them, tightly buttoned their collars and pulled their caps over their heads, treated them to lemonade in the canteen and took them outside where he bumped straight into anxious-looking Sholpan.

"Where's Nurlan?"

"How on earth do I know!"

"We'll get him for this at the next meeting!"

For some unknown reason Yerkin felt somewhat guilty in Sholpan's eyes although it was Nurlan Akatov, Rusty Nail, that absolute good-for-nothing, who was entirely to blame for everything!

Yerkin's mother had often been ill and Yerkin, who was her last son, was a puny baby. His father had explained to him that he would only get stronger

if he worked at it himself. He also told him about great Khadji-Mukan, an invincible wrestling champion who had travelled the world over. When he was a lad, Yerkin's father had driven his sheep to Kuyanda market where he had once watched a wrestling match in which Khadji-Mukan had pinned his opponent's shoulder-blades to the ground. As a little boy, Yerkin used to challenge his friends to wrestling matches and if he won, he would sit astride his opponent and shout out, "I'm the great Kazakh wrestler, Khadji-Mukan!" And whenever Yerkin ended up flat on his back, his triumphant opponent, ginger-haired Nurlan or Kolya Kudaibergenov, would also shout out at the top of his voice, "I'm the great Kazakh wrestler, Khadji-Mukan!"

By that time his mother was already confined to her bed. One day he woke up in the night, and needing to relieve himself, stumbled outside half-asleep, turned and suddenly heard his father's uncle, Abiké, and someone else talking to his father in angry voices. "Aren't you a Kazakh, then?" yelled Abiké in a temper. Yerkin crept inside unnoticed, covered himself with his blanket and dropped off at once. Next morning he began recalling the previous night: the humid mist, the bleating of the huddled flock, the smell of chilled smoke and the snorting of horses... He remembered what had been said outside the yurt. Abiké had been trying to persuade Yerkin's father to take a second wife so that she could help his first one who was already old and infirm. And it was then that he had exclaimed in exasperation, "Aren't you a Kazakh, then?"

However, his father had not taken a second wife then or even after his mother's death. Instead, his father's elder sister, a widow by the name of Juma-biké-apai, came to look after the family. His mother

had been small and by the age of eleven he had already grown into her boots and sheepskin coat and began wearing, tearing and losing all her everyday things. However, her holiday clothes with silver embroidery were kept locked in a trunk for Yerkin's future wife.

The books left behind by Yerkin's elder brothers and sisters were kept in another trunk and before he went to school, he learnt the alphabet and began to read equally well in both languages. He was astonishingly good at forming Kazakh and Russian words. They seemed to him to grow naturally and of their own accord in the same way as grass or one of his lambs in the steppe. Kenjegali had visited home when Yerkin was still a small boy and, catching sight of him, had exclaimed, "My, what a fine *djigit** you are!" And Yerkin had quickly replied, "Are you a *djigit*, too?" His elder brother glanced down at himself and, deciding that his brother thought he was referring to his outfit and haircut, answered, "Yes, I'm a bit of one, too." Later Yerkin had asked his father whether his elder brother really was a *djigit* and his father had replied that he certainly was. Then Yerkin had asked him if his father, was, too, and the latter had replied that he had been once. Then the word *djigit* began to make more sense. According to the poet Abai whom he had read, a Kazakh is also a child of man... He committed evil not so much because he had lost his reason but because he was not firm-hearted. But a man who has lost control of himself and left the way of honesty and truth and begun indulging in vices of all kinds,

* *Djigit* — a young fellow; also a skilled, daring horseman.— *Ed.*

can no longer consider himself a man, let alone a *djigit*.

Yerkin taught himself to be firm. He had read somewhere about the famous Abyssinian runners and started running in order to build up his stamina. His father, who disliked going anywhere on foot and would ride rather than walk even half a kilometre, said to Yerkin, "There've been famous horsemen in the steppe but never famous runners but there're a lot of things this steppe has never seen. We, Kazakhs, are very fond of copying all sorts of good things off other peoples, so why shouldn't you learn the Abyssinian national *djigits'* ancient art? And Yerkin began running every day. After running at a steady pace for five kilometres, his breathing would gradually improve and his pulse rate, which Vasya had taught him to measure, would go back to normal. His blood, however, would remain hot, like coal under ashes, for a long time afterwards. When he was already sitting quietly in class, his blood was still pounding away like mad. And he felt so calm precisely because he was glowing inside. Even earth was scattered on bonfires in the steppe so that they retained their heat longer...

As he gazed into his distant future, which was already settled, Yerkin saw flocks of sheep grazing freely in the steppe and his house standing somewhere nearby. He would imagine himself riding up to this house, now on a horse, now in a specially-designed cross-country vehicle which did not spoil the vegetation of the steppe. Such vehicles were not used yet but they would be some day because they were badly needed by the local shepherds. Yerkin imagined his house, its spacious high-ceilinged rooms, books and guns and carpets on the walls and floors. He knew that at the sound of hooves or an engine,

the mistress of the house would run out to greet him but he had no idea who she would be. It would be easiest of all for him to see Sholpan in his future home for she would enter it, knowing in advance how to run it and how to organise their lives. However, although it seemed she was destined to be his wife, Yerkin resented the feeling that his future life was being mapped out for him by someone else. Stubborn like the rest of his family, he refused to submit to someone else's will. He still had to find out something that becomes clear only after years of experience, namely, that it is hardest of all for a young person to accept things which are almost bound to happen later.

In the mountain summer pastures he had once seen someone galloping across the dewy grass from the east. He was lying face down in the cool grass. The sun was still low in the sky. The rider galloping at full speed was brightly lit up by the sun from behind and his face could not be seen. You see, the same shaft of sunlight was running in a direct line between the sun, the rider and Yerkin, that is, three arbitrary points were arranged in a most unusual way. The rider was galloping in a straight line and he remained in between the sun and Yerkin and could not be seen although he was most likely someone local whom Yerkin knew.

Yerkin then realised that sunlight not only illuminates every tiny blade of grass on the earth's surface and even the slightest movement of a small lizard or snake but also hides things when it is overwhelmingly powerful and bright. In short, bright sunlight sometimes obscures things. Yerkin tested out his observations on a moonlit night and discovered for sure that in pale moonlight you could see many things you did not even notice in sunlight.

Something similar had now happened: he saw Masha every day as he sat next to her and he had noticed all her little habits such as chewing her pen and drawing cats' faces on her blotting paper but he could not remember her face for it was as if it had been obscured by an unbearably bright light.

Her younger brother had turned up at his house with a box tied crosswise with white string.

"Mother asked me to give you this. She baked it herself."

Her younger brother looked at him with his light-coloured Russian eyes which were just as unknowing, however, as those of the local lads.

"What's that you've got on the wall? Oh, I see, a whip... And what's that? And what's this? Is it true that shepherds hang sheep's shin-bones on their houses to keep the evil spirits away from the flock?"

Yerkin followed his inquisitive guest around his house, which had suddenly become a museum of sorts, and thought, "He's probably not bad... but I won't find the right word to describe him, he's so different from me..." There was still a long time to pass before the following summer when Vitya Stepanov was going to help Yerkin's father. Masha's brother was getting ready in all earnest for the work: he had got hold of a sheep-rearing handbook for livestock specialists and had already learnt a lot of what a person living in the steppe was supposed to know. However, everything that he said left Yerkin unconvinced and he simply could not imagine Vitya in the Sadvakasovs' yurt the following summer.

Yerkin took down the whip with a goat-hoof on its handle from the wall and handed it to Masha's brother.

"If you like it, take it."

As he was leaving, Vitya carefully tucked the whip inside his jacket as if it had not spent all its life out of doors in the wind and frost but had simply been a wall decoration with a silver rim round its slender hoof.

Yerkin had wanted to give the sausage-meat to the colonel in person but Salman had opened the door to him and looked arrogantly at him as if the apartment belonged to him and he, Yerkin, was a complete idiot.

Yerkin had always kept clear of Salman. From an early age his father had taught him to eat anything put in front of him and sleep anywhere available but to be choosy as far as his friends were concerned if he did not want to be discredited.

He could not understand why Masha's brother had not found anyone else among the local lads to invite home except Salman.

Old Museké used to spend the winter with his flock over two hundred kilometres away from Chupchi in the desert and Yerkin lived alone in their hut near Chupchi. Every day he would run five kilometres at a steady pace in order to build up his stamina, not to beat records. When he got back from school, he would light the stove which had been reset by clever Kolya. When the firewood was burning steadily and the flame was flickering horizontally, showing that a draught had been set up, Yerkin would push the two hotplates off the iron top and pour in half a bucket of coal pellets which had been sprinkled with water. One hour later the iron plate would be red-hot. Yerkin would pick up a poker and stoke the crust of coal which was glowing dark-blue and crimson like the bowels of the earth. Kolya had wisely hung the stove door on a hinge so that it could be hermetically sealed and dampers

were not needed in the flue to regulate the draught. What's more, Yerkin did not have to worry about being poisoned by charcoal fumes, and the kettle on the iron plate remained hot until morning.

Yerkin owned an alarm-clock but was trying to learn to get up at any time he had decided upon the night before. So he began waking up just before the alarm-clock began ringing shrilly and hopping up and down on his table. He had arranged everything in his life in a neat and tidy way. He imagined that steppe life in the future would also be organised sensibly so that a good life was secured for everyone — Kazakhs, Russians and Ukrainians alike, everyone, that is, who cherished the land they lived in.

CHAPTER SIX

Salman trudged to school before daybreak. There were still no footprints on the icy hoar-frost which had covered the entire school-yard during the night. All the windows were black and no lights were on in the teachers' room, the headmaster had not yet arrived. Only Auntie Dusya, who lived alone in the school, was washing the corridor floor with a mop. Salman slipped quietly past her and her wet mop which she used to flick at scuffing feet.

In the washroom he drank his fill of cold water and, splashed his eyes which had glued together after a sleepless night. He had not yet decided whether to attend lessons that day. After everything he had seen that night, he did not feel like loafing round Chupchi or sitting in class next to Vitya because he was bound to be called up to the head-teacher after lessons. He did not want to do anything at all

but it turned out to be a very cold frosty morning and there was nowhere warm he could go except school. And so there he was standing in the boys' washroom, feeling so wretched that he suddenly thought of a way of avenging himself by writing about Rusty Nail on the wall... He got the giant red pencil, which Vitya had given him, out of his satchel and began tracing the words, "Akotov is a squealer."

Then he poked his head out of the washroom and, as Auntie Dusya was already nowhere to be seen, he walked slowly down the corridor, climbed the iron staircase leading to the attic and hid his satchel in a safe place.

From the attic sky-light he caught sight of Seraphima Gavrilovna striding across the school-yard. It looked as if she had not noticed his telltale winding footprints on the frosty ground, which looked as white as a new exercise-book. She could not possibly know about the events of the previous night and would only find out everything by the third lesson, Salman worked out as he listened to Seraphima Gavrilovna and Auntie Dusya talking loudly (women always talked loudly!) in the corridor below. A door, probably that of the teachers' room, banged shut behind them. Then all of a sudden Salman heard a car screeching to a halt by the doors. The car door was slammed violently shut by someone obviously in a furious temper. He hurried on to the hatch over the corridor and saw Doctor Dospayev marching along.

He's found out! He's been told! He works at the hospital like Dad! Salman guessed in a flash and crept soundlessly down the iron steps and tiptoed towards the teachers' room which Dospayev had just entered. A narrow shaft of light fell into the dark corridor.

"Saulé had kept everything from us but my wife and I have eventually guessed ourselves that someone from the school is persecuting her in a petty, spiteful way. And I found a surgical scalpel, which, incidentally, once belonged to me, near the spot where someone recently splashed wet lime over her..."

"A scalpel?" gasped Seraphima Gavrilovna.

"You brainless ass!" Salman hissed angrily into his fist as he hid behind the door. He realised that the head doctor had not yet been informed of what had happened that night and would only find out at the ten o'clock briefing in the hospital. However, the fact that Dospayev had rushed round here in a rage to see Seraphima Gavrilovna so early in the morning was an additional blow to Salman after that dreadful night. It was not for nothing that his father used to say it never rained but it poured...

"No, I don't intend holding an investigation behind the teachers' backs. Everything's too coincidental for that. Your fifth-formers came to the hospital for X-rays yesterday and I asked Vitya Stepanov point-blank if he had lost his scalpel. You see, my wife gave it to him as a present. He blushed and admitted he had indeed dropped it somewhere."

"Vitya Stepanov? Why, he's such a quiet, well-mannered boy, he'd never..."

"I don't know about that!"

"Of course, we should have taken a more serious attitude to the rather strained relations between Saulé and Masha Stepanova," said Seraphima Gavrilovna. "I won't say there was any hostility between them but..."

"You stupid pig!" Salman cursed himself but swearing did not help him feel any less miserable. "I'm such a fool!" Salman bit his fist.

And then for the umpteenth time that morning he recalled the knock at the door and his father jumping to and fro from the door to the window and back to the stove with his bare feet. And then in came four men — two Kazakhs, a Russian and a Tatar — and they all were strangers to Chupchi but they all somehow knew what they were looking for and where to find it in the hospital watchman's house. They found the wads of money notes, put them on the table, counted them and wrote down the sums as they did so... Even Salman, who knew they had money stashed away in their home, was amazed by the large fortune which had been hidden away in their shack. He guessed before his father that it was Rusty Nail who had led them to their house. His father had been wrong to entrust such a risky business to Nurlan Akatov. And why, indeed, had his father got mixed up with Rusty Nail when the latter had gone with his class on an excursion to Alma-Ata? He had evidently wanted to get Akatov more involved but nothing of the sort had happened. Akatov, it seemed, had got into a pretty mess in Alma-Ata. Akatov, what a coward and squealer, he was!..

...The bare bulb hanging from the ceiling cast plenty of light on the strangers as they counted the large sums of money by the curtainless windows. Salman noticed that if anyone was ashamed, it was the strangers who were counting money in the Mazitovs' tumbledown shack in the presence of the little children who had woken up, got out of bed and come over to stare at them. Salman already realised that his father would be taken away. He realised that at once but his younger brothers and sisters started howling at the top of their voices when the low rickety door slammed shut behind

their father and they caught on to what was happening. Salman jumped down from his bunk-bed and switched off the light. The bar of chocolate which strangers had given him out of pity was melting in his fist. He popped bits of it into his younger brothers' and sisters' mouths in the darkness. The children chewed in silence while he quickly got dressed and dashed outside. The dry frost burned his eyes, which were blood-shot from the bright artificial light. He thought how, if it had been summer, he would have been peacefully asleep in his shelter when the strangers turned up and would not have seen or felt anything, least of all fear or malice.

He stood behind the stove in the school corridor, feeling like a pathetic gopher. He was cornered: his hole was being flooded with icy cold water which was rising all the time and pushing him into his enemies' hands. Even the most cowardly of beasts, such as the gopher or the hare, will bite and claw when it is cornered. Salman wanted to do exactly that now. After all, Seraphima Gavrilovna was bound to find out who had revenged Saulé for Vitya's elder sister.

He had lost the chance of slipping out of school unnoticed. He had either acted rashly and foolishly or unconsciously had wanted to stay behind to see Vitya for the last time. And so, regardless of the fact that his satchel and all his school-books were hidden in the attic, Salman found himself sitting in his usual place next to Vitya, who knew nothing of what was happening. Exhausted after a sleepless night, he warmed up and dozed off. His teachers did not ask him a single question for after all, they should be grateful that he had even bothered to turn up. Two lessons passed in this way. The third was

meant to be gymnastics but their form-master Vasya, called a meeting instead.

Salman woke up with a start and thought, "I've had it! This is it! And I haven't had time to warn Vitya!"

Frowning grimly, the form-master looked round at his pupils, who were sitting silently in anticipation, and made a mental note of all the pupils who began fidgeting as if they had done something wrong. The sly women teachers always lumbered Vasya, a war veteran and officer, with the most mischievous classes, although, if the truth be known, they were much better at handling the school's rebels. With their female intuition they uncovered all the intrigues going on in the school, skilfully handled all their pupils' various likes and dislikes and offered advice in a tactful way while Vasya was much blunter and always preferred to take the bull by the horns.

His pupils knew that furious outbursts passed as quickly as they begun, and used them to suit themselves. It was possibly for this reason that the wayward classes entrusted to Vasya survived the rough patches of their lives and gradually returned to the straight and narrow. Herein lay, perhaps, the most important secret of teaching, which on no account could be disclosed in the interests of the children and the teachers for it would then lose its powerful effect.

Vasya searched with his eyes for the bosom friends, Mazitov and Stepanov, and wondered for the umpteenth time what on earth they had in common and then got down to the matter which had made him cancel the gym lesson. Neither he nor the head-teacher had yet been told about the arrest of Salman Mazitov's father. This was the duty of Inspector Bukashev, who had gone off with the Alma-Ata

detectives to some *auls* in search of Mazitov's accomplices.

"This is a disgrace to the whole class!" thundered Vasya who was used to giving marching orders. "Something despicable has happened!"

Salman had never felt afraid of Vasya and had taught Vitya from the very start that any woman teacher in the school was stricter than their form-master and should therefore be feared more. On the contrary, it was Vasya who should be afraid that Mazitov did not let him down.

Miserable Salman sat still while the form-master let off steam but he kept both his ears open all the same. He knew that Vitya was only good at grasping things in botany classes and only quick at solving problems in arithmetic but would now be the last to guess what was being said... Well, any moment now... Yes, he'd twigged... Salman looked out of the corner of his eye at his neighbour and saw fear was written on his spotlessly clean angelic face with its neatly-combed fair fringe.

"Salman? Not you?"

Not even the most cowardly shunks had ever gone and pointed their finger at Salman Mazitov but now he saw that his only friend Vitya Stepanov was scared stiff. And Vitya's cowardice, which he had always forgiven, now struck him in the back like a knife. You blind fool, Salman Mazitov! You've been bought with sweet tea, bread and jam and goldfish...

Salman shouted into his clean little scared face, "Coward! Traitor!" and stalked out of the class. He was so furious he seemed to go deaf and could not hear whether he was being shouted at or not. He strode along the empty corridor at a dignified pace, he did not humiliate himself by running away like a coward but, on the other hand, did not go

slowly as if hoping to be excused. By the doors Auntie Dusya barred his way with her mop but he thrust her multi-purpose weapon aside and stepped into the school yard where he could be seen from all the windows by the teachers who enjoyed looking outside while someone was scratching the answer to a problem on the blackboard, and by all the lazy-bones who were bound to be gazing at the free world outside and not at the board. Many eyes were now watching him leave school for the last time. And the satchel and books and everything else which had been bought for him out of school money could rot, for all he cared, in the attic: he would never go back.

"Salman! Hang on!" he heard someone calling.

Vitya was running across the yard, pulling on his coat.

"Salman! Stop!"

Salman bent down and picked up a frozen dropping.

"Don't come any closer, your cowardly custard, or I'll hit you!"

"What's the matter?" asked Vitya, stopping.

"Don't come any nearer!" Salman threateningly waved his hand containing the frozen dropping, turned and walked on. His only thought was to keep going straight ahead and to get as far away from the *aul* and school as possible. Then it dawned on him that he would not get very far on foot and so he turned towards the hooting trains at the station.

He glanced round and saw Vitya walking stubbornly after him. Vitya somehow knew that his main task now was to keep up with Salman. All he was going by was his youthful instinct which embodies all the best aspirations of man.

A book-worm and a bungler where practical matters were concerned, Vitya not only managed to race out of the class after Salman but, as if compelled by some unknown force, had also enough presence of mind to grab his coat and fur cap from the cloakroom by the entrance. It was as if he had foreseen right from the start that a very long journey lay ahead of them.

They did a circle round the steppe and then Vitya caught sight of the station ahead: Salman walked straight towards it without looking round or answering Vitya's questions. A long freight train was waiting by the semaphore, one kilometre or so down the line. Salman dived under it with Vitya on his heels, trembling with fear for if the train moved, its enormous heavy wheels would make mince-meat out of them. The train, however, stood patiently still. After diving out the other side, Vitya caught sight of Salman darting away. He started running too, and called urgently, "Salman! Wait!"

Salman noticed that one of the carriage doors of the freight train was slightly ajar. He jumped up, hung on tightly, squeezed through the crack, scrambled to his feet and tried with all his might to shut the heavy door behind him but it was well and truly jammed.

The first time Vitya tried jumping up he slipped and fell but the second time he hung on his arms and pulled himself up, landing on belly-down on the door runner, his legs dangling in the air. As he did so, he banged his face on the floor which had been sprinkled with a foul-smelling powder. And at that very moment the train jolted forwards and the sharp jerk was enough to close the heavy plate door which had proved too strong for the young lad. Salman hardly managed to grab Vitya by the scruff

of the neck and drag him inside before the door slammed and they were plunged into darkness.

The points thundered under the wheels as the train picked up speed.

"We've had it!" said Vitya. "We won't be able to jump out now!"

"I don't intend to!" replied Salman, spitting out the bitter saliva which had accumulated in his mouth. "I've decided to leave home for good. Do you hear? I'm running away. So it'll do you no good tagging after me! I'm going a long way!"

"Where to?"

"Vladivostok, on the Pacific!" said Salman on the spur of the moment and was delighted by the first idea which would get him out of his tight corner. "Yes, Vladivostok..."

"Yes, that is a long way... Look, why don't we get down at the next station instead?"

"You can if you like! I'm not going to. I'm off to Vladivostok."

"But the train's not going that way," said Vitya, spitting the bitter-tasting saliva out of his mouth. "To get to Vladivostok from here, you have to go through Novosibirsk. But this train's heading south towards Tashkent."

"How do you know whether it's going north or south when you even got lost in a maize field?"

"I was little then. You're really odd, Salman. Look, it's about eleven o'clock now. The sun was on our left. That means we're heading south-west... Hey, what's this powder on the floor? I keep wanting to spit. It must be something poisonous. We've got to get out of here. And anyway, you still don't know whether you'll be expelled or not... If you like I'll have a word with my Dad and then he'll speak to yours?.."

"My Dad was taken off to the clink last night."

"To prison? What for?"

"For being a good boy!" Salman walked over to the door and leant his shoulder against it. "I'll open the door for you, Vitya, and you can jump out." He strained with all his might but the door still did not budge. "When I've opened it, you can jump out at the first station. I'm not a friend of yours any longer. My Dad's a thief, no, he's even worse than a thief. Well, why are you standing there like that? Come on, you coward! How could you have been alive for so long without understanding the slightest thing about life?.. I'm the son of a thief! Got it?"

"Yes... Your Dad's been put in prison but that doesn't mean you're to blame... I know you, don't forget. You're honest!"

"You don't know anything!" Salman began shouting. "I'm a thief, too! Have I ever nicked things from the market? Of course, I have! Did I nick that blanket? Of course, I did! What? Are you scared? Don't worry, I haven't nicked anything from your house! That's enough claptrap — come on, push the door!"

"Let's both get down!" Vitya pleaded stubbornly. "Come on!"

No matter how hard they tried, the door would not budge. The train had been given the green light and was racing further and further away from Chupchi.

And back at home an alarm had already been raised because everybody had found out that Mazitov, the hospital watchman, had been arrested during the night and that his son, Salman, had ran away from the *aul* with Vitya Stepanov, who was obviously not such a goody-goody as he made out.

Many people had watched them leave the school premises and head off into the steppe. They put two and two together and decided that as the two boys had been playing about in the steppe in the summer, they must have some secret dens out there...

"This powder's going to kill us off like flies!" said Salman, spitting.

"No, it's more like phosphorus," said Vitya, licking his finger and dipping it in the powder. "It stings a bit," Vitya hesitated and then asked, "Why did you throw stones at that girl?"

"He doesn't understand a single thing!" Salman muttered in incredulous disbelief to himself. "How can people be so dim?"

CHAPTER SEVEN

The evening before Kolya's third-former brother had gone to a film show at the boarding-house and when he got home, he had whispered to his brother, "Rusty Nail's left the boarding-house for good. The staff don't know that yet but that's what everyone's saying." Kolya became anxious if the younger ones were gossiping about Nurlan, it meant something really had happened.

He went to the boarding-house straightaway. The teacher on duty, who was known as Duke, was dozing on the plastic-covered sofa in the study-room. The older boys' dormitory was empty. Kolya opened Nurlan's bedside locker and at once realised that Rusty Nail really had gone off somewhere. Kolya, of course, said nothing to lazy Duke who never did checks before bedtime or went through the dormitories at night. Kolya therefore knew for certain

he had plenty of time to find out what had happened to Nurlan without raising an alarm.

In the dark corridor somebody tugged at Kolya's trousers and, whispered hotly, "This is for you." Kolya went out onto the porch, stood in the pale light of the lamp in a metal shade, and slowly read the note in his hand, which read as follows: "Goodbye, Kudaibergenov! I'll write when I get settled. Your unfortunate friend Nurlan Akatov."

"Why didn't you bring it to me at once? Couldn't you have passed it on to my brother? He was with you at the film show, wasn't he?" Kolya hissed angrily to Askar who had run out after him.

Everybody in the school already knew this clever little first-former. The singing master had discovered he had a perfect ear and he had sung some merry songs at the last school concert.

"Why are you so dim!" Kolya ticked off the young celebrity, "It's an important matter and you've kept the note in your pocket for ages!"

"Nurlan told me to give it only to Kudaibergenov in person and to do so tomorrow in school and not to show it to anyone or tell anyone about it..." reported Askar like a resistance fighter or partisan messenger.

Kolya, who liked fair play, changed his tune at once for the first-former was, after all, a tough little fellow and, generally speaking, he and his friends were growing up to be worthy replacements for the older boys and girls who would be leaving school soon.

Kolya then went straight to the Sadvakasovs' winter hut for there was no point in his even calling in at home. If he told his grandfather that Nurlan was in trouble, he was bound to reply in a spiteful tone, "You mean, old Sadyk's grandson? I remember

old Sadyk all right. He was a great showman, too. You could get him going as easy as pie but it was damn hard to shut him up." If he believed everything his grandfather said, it was impossible for Sadyk to produce any good offspring. For instance, Nurlan's Uncle Otarbek in Thaelmann was a complete dead loss: he had never done a single day's work in his life and, would you believe, had now been put in charge of the local community centre. Mind you, it could hardly be called a centre, could it? The regional community centre was a columned building on the main estate whereas this filial club was a plain mud hut, which had not even been white-washed, and was only used once a week for film shows. Otarbek would not even lift a finger to keep it clean. "Look, I'm the manager and I'm in charge of the amateur dramatics and concerts," he declared, "Would you be so kind as to engage someone else to keep the premises clean..."

When Kolya started worrying about his friend, for some reason or other he immediately thought of Uncle Otarbek. And, what's more, whenever there had been any conflicts in the past, Nurlan had always preferred running to his hopeless old uncle rather than seek the advice of more reliable people.

What had he gone and done now? Surely it wasn't because of his bad marks?..

It did not even dawn on Kolya that Nurlan's disappearance could have anything to do with what had happened in Alma-Ata the previous summer. Nurlan had been given an errand by Mazitov and told to go to certain address. When he got there, however, he fell into a trap set up by the local militia who had arrested some black-marketeers and were waiting to see who else would show up for

the goods. Nurlan was questioned and turned loose. He was so afraid of Mazitov that he did not even tell Kolya anything. That's why Kolya had completely forgotten how one night in Alma-Ata Nurlan had turned up very late in a terribly jittery state...

Yerkin was lying on his bed, staring up at the ceiling.

"What's the matter? Are you sick?"

"No. I was just lying here." Yerkin got up and straightened his bed. He lived alone all winter but looked after the house just as well as any *aul* housewife. Only for some reason he had become more taciturn recently.

Yerkin was not unduly surprised to hear about Nurlan's disappearance. He told Kolya how a week ago Rusty Nail had come to his house simply to while away the time of day with him.

"You certainly live well, Yerkin." ... "I've always thought you had a much more exciting life." "Have you ever known what it feels like to be me? I never get a moment's peace... But how could you understand, you've got the nerves of a horse..."

This was not the first time Nurlan had tried to compare him to a horse. He had called him names, such as Jumper and Skipper but these nicknames had never stuck to Yerkin because he never took any notice of them.

"You don't happen to know who's been making up sums with my initial and scrubbing 'N + F = LOVE' on walls?"

"No."

"I'll kill whoever it is. What do I care about Faridá? You never get written about although I know you've got someone... Just tell me this: your dad's a shepherd and so is mine. I'm a cheerful sort of fellow but people are always poking fun at

me. You never say a word but people respect you and reckon you're clever. Why is that? Tell me that if you really are clever. They can't find anyone better to link my name with than Faridá. You don't get written about although I know you've got someone, too. What's that instrument doing on the wall? Do you play to yourself? Why don't you perform at school concerts?"

"Why should I?"

"Why, why... That's all you can say. You're so boring, Sadvakasov."

"Why have you come to see me, then?" asked Yerkin indifferently.

He could see that Nurlan had come to speak to him about something important but he was so flighty and light-headed that he could not stop chattering and showing off. And so Yerkin never found out what he had come to see him for. Kolya Kudaibergenov was quite different: he let you know what he wanted straightaway and then you could decide what to do.

While they were working out a plan, Isabek came in, listened to their conversation for a while and then asked in surprise why they had not already left for Thaelmann on Rusty Nail's trail.

"We'll go early tomorrow morning," said Yerkin. "Kolya can take his Grandad's horse. Will you get one for me?"

"Of course," replied Isabek.

...They left early the next morning without knowing anything about how the two fifth-formers had run away.

The name of the *aul*, Thaelmann, was pronounced locally in the Kazakh way with the stress on the last syllable. It was here that one of the first collective farms in the steppe was once set up, named after

the heroic German Communist, Ernst Thaelmann. At first, it was called the Ernst Thaelmann Collective Farm, and then, more simply, "Thaelmann" but over the years it gradually became known as "Thaelmann".

As he reached the first houses in the *aul*, Yerkin reined in his horse and slowed down. People in the steppe did not like madcaps galloping up to *auls* at full pelt as if they were bringing news of an enemy's invasion or of some other appalling catastrophe.

They rode down the short street. In Thaelmann Kazakhs, Ukrainians and Germans lived together in a close-knit community but at the same time tried to keep their own identity. The Ukrainians white-washed and decorated the platbands of their houses. Rather than waste money on decorating, the Germans put all their energy into building strong outhouses in their yards. The Kazakhs did not white-wash their houses either and preferred to keep their yards completely bare so that they could ride straight up to their doorway from the steppe.

Of all the Kazakh yards the barest and most exposed belonged to Nurlan's Uncle Otarbek. Yerkin looked round and could not see anywhere to tether the horses, but then a band of little children poured out of various doors and grabbed hold of his reins. Suddenly Yerkin heard the sound of guitar strings and a cracked high-pitched voice.

"Yes, our friend's here!" Yerkin pushed open the door which was hanging on one hinge.

It was stuffy and very untidy in the hut's one and only room. A dish of boiled meat, a green bottle and two dirty finger-smudged glasses were standing on a sheet of newspaper on the rug in the middle.

Kolya froze at the sight of such a disgusting mess, but Yerkin walked casually towards his hosts as if he had been invited, sat down and said to the singer, "Do go on... I'm sorry if we've interrupted anything."

Nurlan leant back against the rug, struck the strings and began singing a sad love song which had been popular during the war.

Otarbek snorted and rustled up two more dirty glasses from somewhere. There were shiny bald patches on his shaved head, the after-effects of a children's disease which was no longer found in this part of the world.

Pretending not to notice that his glass was being filled with vodka from the green bottle, Yerkin asked Nurlan to sing something else.

"Something Russian?" Nurlan asked sharply. "I know a v-very good old romance which I'll sing specially for you, Yerkin!"

Kolya began to lose his temper and thought, "Just you wait, I'll show you a thing or two afterwards..."

Nurlan sang the song simply, putting his heart and soul into it. He had learnt the old romance from Korotun but whereas the major became so sad while singing it that he went completely to pieces, Nurlan somehow realised that it should be sung with a grave countenance but in a light and happy manner.

Of its own accord Yerkin's heart began pounding faster and his blood raced in his veins as he listened. I'll never be like this, he thought, I never let myself go. I'm always rational like Saulé. But that's all wrong. I must live differently somehow.

Yerkin knew that, more often than not, Nurlan made a mess of things but he could not help genuinely envying Nurlan's carefree, happy-go-lucky nature and despising his own invariable self-

restraint. He always felt so bridled! But what was the point when he was bound to get his fair share of happiness and sorrow, whatever happened, just as one got showered with the sweets, which were thrown into the air like confetti at *aul* weddings. So why sorry? He should let go of himself and see what happened. Why not find out what it was like to lose control?

Nurlan banged the strings for the last time. "Why have you come here?" asked his guitar.

"To see you, you idiot!" fumed Kolya.

"And discuss things," added Yerkin. "Two heads are better than one, you know..."

Otarbek at once started picking holes in him.

"So, you reckon you're clever, do you? And you reckon I can't give advice to my favourite brother's son?"

"Not at all! We're waiting to hear your advice."

Otarbek wiped his lower lip with an air of importance, spat some baccy stained saliva onto the pitted floor and began speaking solemnly about Nurlan's talent and about how he was wasting his time at school. How could anyone even dare to think he was ever going to be a shepherd! No, he'd never stoop that low! Talent required freedom. What's more, Nurlan was a member of the Buguchi family and a grandson of Sadyk. Any household would welcome him with wide-open arms and give him food and shelter. It was time for the people in the steppe to return to the traditions of the good old days when bards lived off their instruments and never needed to bow and scrape.

Otarbek gabbled on and on in a loud high-flown manner.

Yerkin chuckled ironically. According to a Kazakh saying, people who survived the illness Otarbek had

had in his childhood, were very cunning and artful. Otarbek, however, was obviously a fool.

Kolya finally exploded and yelled,

"Nurlan! Why the heck don't you say something?"

Nurlan had apparently been waiting for the right cue to hang his head miserably on his chest and clutch his head in his hands,

"There's no point telling you anything, Kolya," he said, sighing heavily. "You've got your whole life ahead of you whereas I've finished mine."

"Oh, go and jump in a lake!" ranted Kolya and got up demonstratively to show that Yerkin could do what he liked but he was leaving.

"Goodbye!" Nurlan glanced briefly at him. "You don't know me and I don't know you. Right? The gang's not only going to get even with me but with all my mates, too."

"What gang?" asked Otarbek suspiciously.

That was enough to get Nurlan going! He gave a colourful description of how he had once helped the militia get on the tracks of a large gang and surround a hideout in Alma-Ata. The bandits put up a fierce fight: two of them jumped over a wall, knocked out a militiaman and took to their heels. The grey-headed chief inspector who had been seriously wounded in similar scuffles many times before, told Nurlan outright that he should keep on the lookout for the bandits were sure to get even with him. The chief inspector offered to help him move somewhere far away like Siberia or the Caucasus where he could live under a false name but Nurlan decided not to be cowardly and to go back home...

"But then..." Nurlan's voice trailed off tragically as if he wanted his listeners to imagine the rest.

"I never reckoned you'd behave so meanly!" Otarbek jumped up and began waving his arms about.

"Do you want to get me and my family into trouble?" He threw a raincoat and scarf at his nephew. "I'm not a coward but I've got a wife and kids to think of!"

Yerkin got up and winked at Kolya to show they had won. Then he turned to Nurlan and said concernedly,

"Your uncle's right. You can't hide in his house. Let's get going."

"All right," agreed Nurlan gloomily.

"Let's have one for the road!" said Otarbek, bustling about.

"No thanks, Uncle," said Yerkin. "We've got to keep sober so that we can work out how to help Nurlan. Goodbye."

"All the best!" called Kolya in the same pleasant tone as Yerkin. He was almost bursting with laughter because Otarbek had certainly done his best to help them! Anyone else would have had to be coaxed and argued with until their voices were hoarse but Nurlan had turned himself out of his uncle's house by talking all that dreadful nonsense!

In the yard the children scuffled to win the privilege of leading up the saddled horses.

"Jump on behind me," Kolya said to Nurlan.

"Good luck!" Otarbek came out quickly to see the boys off and check that his neighbours were not looking too curiously at them, "Don't gas too much about where you've been. Remember a loose tongue's never done anybody any good."

Nurlan looked incredulously at his uncle as if he couldn't believe his ears.

Kolya clapped his hand over his heart and said solemnly,

"Cross my heart!"

Once they were out of the yard, they set off at a gallop.

It was only now that he was sitting behind Kolya that Nurlan realised what nonsense his uncle had been talking. He had gone to him directly after visiting the local militiaman, Bukashev. The latter had asked him if Mazitov knew that the gang in Alma-Ata had been arrested. Nurlan replied that he did not know and that, indeed, was the truth. When he left Bukashev, he kept his fingers crossed that he didn't bump into Mazitov and then headed for Thaelmann as fast as his legs could carry him. You see, his uncle had been telling him for ages to give up school and become a singer. He was delighted to see him and at once offered him a job as his assistant at the club. If the truth be known, however, Otarbek should have been sacked long ago and his job given to someone who would keep the club clean because there was no other work to be done there. Surely Nurlan knew this? Of course, he did! He just pretended to take all his uncle's offers seriously. What a brilliant actor he was!

The roofs of Thaelmann were dissolving into the horizon when Nurlan suddenly began fidgeting and pounding his fists on Kolya's jacket,

"Stop! I'm not going any further!"

Yerkin, who was galloping slightly ahead, stopped and asked,

"What's up?"

"You reckon you can tie me up like a sheep and cart me off, do you?" Nurlan jumped down and looked up at the boys. "You reckon there's no point discussing things with me? You're so chuffed to have got me away from my uncle! Don't worry, I'd have left him myself sooner or later!"

"Where for?" Kolya began twisting angrily in his saddle. "Where would you have gone to?"

Yerkin took his foot out of his stirrup.

"Nurlan's right. Let's talk."

They caught sight of a tumbledown winter shelter nearby, freed their horses, went inside and squatted on their heels in the Kazakh manner.

"Well then... Yes, I lied to you. I made up the story about the gang but I'm still in a lot of trouble. You see, I've been working for that skunk Mazitov. People are going to point their fingers at me and say, 'Look! There's Mazitov's go between!' 'Don't have anything to do with Akatov — he's a squealer!' You see, I'm cornered."

Nurlan still did not know that earlier in the morning someone had written in red pencil on the wall of the boys' washroom, "Akatov is a squealer!" and he did not know that only a few people in the school would manage to see the vindictive graffiti. Even Seraphima Gavrilovna only knew of it by hearsay for when she invaded the boys' private reserve after school, she only saw a faint pink smudge through the clouds of cigarette smoke. According to Vasya, the red letters must have been erased before the first break. But who had done it? Seraphima Gavrilovna was lost in conjectures and the pink smudge remained one of the rare unsolved mysteries of the school. Only years later when he was receiving a prize for his excellent exam results at the school-leaving ceremony, did Askar tell Seraphima Gavrilovna how, as a timid first-former, he had seen those shocking words on the washroom wall and decided for Akatov's sake that they should not be there. You see, Akatov was a boarder, too. After carefully thinking things over, he picked up a handful of damp bleach and rubbed his palm across the red letters. It stung his skin dreadfully but he kept on rubbing until the letters became well and truly smudged in the pink mush. Later the skin peeled off his palm but

he stoically sat through the rest of the lessons and back at the boarding-house Auntie Naskét rubbed sunflower oil into his burn, bandaged it with a clean cloth and told him he would still live to be a hundred! Then Askar sat down to his prep. Fortunately, it was his left palm that he had burn... Yes, Askar certainly was a nut even during his first year at school.

"I thought of anybody else you care to name except you silly little chap..." Seraphima Gavrilovna said to him many years later at the school-leaving ceremony. "I remember how tiny and scared you were when you first set foot in the boarding-house. My, how time flies. Before you can say 'knife'..."

If you feel like pondering over the flight of time, the boundless steppe is a wonderful place to do so. As you listen to the old clay crumbling, you suddenly experience an inexplicable feeling of *déjà vu*: the wind is playing in the stiff dry weeds, horses are snorting and clinking their hobbles and three boys are squatting inside a winter shelter.

Did it seem to one or all three of them that they were seeing something of the future? The future is often present in people's thoughts and actions, in fact, it is always and, sure enough, here it was wandering near the tumbledown winter hut, peeping in on the three boys sitting inside.

"All right, you'll bring the runaway back to his dearly beloved school and then what? Have you thought about that?" fumed Nurlan. "You'll call a meeting and Saulé Dospayeva will say, 'Akotov, please stand up and answer our questions!'"

"So what if there's a meeting?" said Kolya. "There'll be people who'll stick up for you, too."

"You mean, I'm a coward? I'll just chicken out?"

"I didn't say that, you did!"

Yerkin banged his whip against his boot and said, "If you keep on pursuing a coward, he'll become brave in the end!"

"No, Sadvakasov, you're not cut out to be a shepherd! You'd be good at pulling teeth out or being a surgeon and cutting people up. You'd get out your knife and cut half a person's heart out in a flash. You don't know what it's like to feel sorry for someone."

"Shut your gob!" snapped Kolya. "Remember what Otarbek said about a loose tongue? Right! Cut it out!"

Yerkin was fiddling with his whip handle.

"When you get back to Chupchi, you've got to make everybody respect you. It'll take a lot of time and effort but you'll manage if you put your mind to it. But if you run away..." Yerkin clicked his tongue. "If you run away — your bad name will linger on after you in every village in the steppe for many years to come. Don't forget, people in the steppe remember bad things for ages."

Kolya nodded gravely and said,

"He's right, you know. If you go back, you'll help put things right. Not straightaway, of course, but definitely in the long run."

"Help? I'll only help them skin me alive!" said Nurlan gloomily. "And the girls are bound to tease me, too. Their tongues are as sharp as razors!" Nurlan clutched his head dramatically and fell onto the ground.

"You've started thinking about girls far too much for the good of you!" remarked Kolya disapprovingly. "Oh come on, stop play-acting and work out what we're going to say in school."

Lying on the ground, Nurlan opened one eye slightly and said,

"Whatever we think up, we still won't outsmart the Head."

"But he's away at the moment and won't be back for another week."

"Then it's Seraphima Gavrilovna we're up against!" Nurlan sat up joyfully. "Why didn't you say so in the first place. She's as easy as pie to get round."

"The more you invent, the more questions they'll ask, so you might just as well tell them the truth in plain and simple language," argued Yerkin. "You had a reason for running off to Thaelmann, didn't you? And Kolya and I had a reason for going to get you, didn't we? That's all there is to it."

"Gosh, what a good idea!" said Kolya enthusiastically. Just keep it short and sweet and give the bare facts."

"That'll do!" said Nurlan, getting up. "You don't know much, do you? You don't know for a start that the simpler the role, the harder it is to act. And you don't understand at all what sort of life actors lead! Do you remember how an actor came to our club last winter and read legends about Aldár-Kosé? He was dressed in a ragged coat and a worn-out cap and looked the spitting image of Aldár-Kosé. He could make everybody in the audience laugh while he kept a straight face and cry when he was laughing. That's what real acting's all about! Then he threw off his worn-out cap and coat and underneath he was dressed just like you and me in a black suit and a shirt and tie! Everybody clapped and he bowed and thanked them. See what I mean? It was the artist

* Kazakh national hero — *Ed.*

who bowed to the audience and not the other way round. Everybody realised he'd got real talent and knew his stuff and that they were being entertained and he was working, yes, working like a horse. I once read a conductor during a concert expended as much physical energy as a miner during two shifts. A miner! As for you..." Nurlan waved his hand dismissingly.

Something appeared on the horizon where the heavy grey sky met the steppe.

"Look, there's a helicopter!" exclaimed Kolya, jumping up.

The helicopter flew low over the steppe, its round body swaying. Yerkin recalled how last summer a smaller helicopter had landed near their yurt in the mountain pastures. The sheep had run towards the chirring sound and surrounded their visitor from the sky. They were used to running towards helicopters because in winter when there were heavy snow-storms or the steppe was covered with an impenetrable crust of ice, tractors or helicopters would bring hay to the pastures and so they always welcomed the sound of a roaring engine.

"They're searching for someone," guessed Kolya when the helicopter slowed down and hovered for a moment over the shelter.

"Perhaps for me?" wondered Nurlan anxiously.

"What on earth would they start searching for you with that wopping thing, you nincompoop! Perhaps a soldier's got lost? Someone like Pasha Kolesnikov, for instance? Remember how he got his nickname?.."

The helicopter flew off towards the winter pastures.

"It's going to the shepherds!"

Shortly afterwards a jeep appeared from the direction in which the helicopter had gone.

Kolya gave a whistle,

"The jeep's heading straight for us!"

There was no doubt about it, the jeep was heading straight for them like a dog on a scent.

"A soldier's driving," said keen-eyed Kolya. "We'll find out in a moment what the army's out searching for. The helicopter sent them after us."

The jeep swept round a few yards in front of the shelter so that its right side was facing them. Major Korotun looked out of the side window and then jumped down and called,

"You haven't by any chance seen two lads from your school in the steppe, have you? Stepanov and Mazitov."

"They'll never walk this far," said Yerkin.

"They might go even further today."

"Why, has anything happened?"

"Well ... nothing out of the ordinary." Korotun was not going to tell anyone the details of what had happened. "Anyway, what are you doing? Haven't you been to school today?"

"We've been to Thaelmann..." hastily replied Kolya, trying to think of a good excuse.

Yerkin tugged at his sleeve.

"Salman Mazitov doesn't know the steppe at all well and won't get far, so there's no point you looking here. Salman often hangs out in tumbledown shacks and that sort of thing back in the *aul*. Have you looked there?"

Korotun looked at the three boys in turn and his gaze stopped on Nurlan.

"Look here, lad... You come with me in the jeep and show me the places we should search on the way." The major lifted up the front seat and helped his "guide" into the back.

The jeep kicked up the sand with its back wheels and speed off towards the *aul*.

"We're bound to find them sooner or later," said the soldier at the wheel. "I ran away from home lots of times as a lad. My dad died — he came back from the war a cripple and only lasted out five years. Well, and my mum went and got remarried damn quick. And, well, my step-father isn't a bad fellow and I get on with him pretty well now but when I was twelve I hated his guts. I used to sleep in the attic and every now and then I'd slip off on trains. I'd be caught and brought back but before long I'd been off again like a shot. Then all of a sudden I stopped wanting to run away. It was like I'd been sick and then got better again... Perhaps that's what's got into these lads? What do you think, major?"

"Listen, lad..." Korotun seemed to have forgotten Nurlan's name, "Listen, lad, what sort of fellow is Mazitov?"

"Mazitov?" repeated Nurlan. "He's a bad sort. If you like I'll sum him up for you in a few words?"

"That won't be necessary," said the major. "Your Mazitov was arrested last night. We'll get enough information about him from official sources. But at present I'm more interested in his son. Has his son been involved in shady deals for a long time? And if so, what exactly are they? And tell me what you know about the stolen fur..."

"Right!" Nurlan seemed to have a detached view of himself and marvelled how calm he felt. "Salman Mazitov from the fifth B form hasn't done anything bad for a long time. He's completely broken free of his old rogue of a father. But do write that down or you'll forget! Salman stopped working with his dad long before Vitya got here, Vitya who you're now

searching for with the help of a helicopter. Please put my testimony down in your report."

Then Nurlan began speaking freely and easily and told the major all about his dealings with Mazitov.

As the major listened, his face grew sterner because he realised how misguided his impression of Nurlan had been. He had thought that Nurlan was sensitive and kind whereas in fact, he was superficial and cowardly.

When Nurlan had finished, he said,

"You know I can't respect you after everything you have just told me. You're a coward and you don't know what honour and conscience are all about."

Nurlan jumped up, banging his head on the canvas roof, and yelled,

"Let me out!"

But you can't get out of the back of a jeep without pushing the front seat forwards.

"Listen to what someone older says to you! I said it for your own good, you know. Don't worry, I'm not going to take you over to my place! We'll drop you off in the *aul*."

...When he was still a long way off, Yerkin spotted a light shining in the window of his hut and smoke rising from the chimney. Isabek must have dropped by to help, put the kettle on and fried some pancakes on a dry frying-pan, the way he liked. Yerkin suddenly felt ravenously hungry. He could not face anything at Otarbek's, and the morning when he and Kolya had bolted down some cold mutton seemed like a dream. What a day it had been!.. It had simply flown by but when he looked back, he saw what a lot he had done in it!

A ridiculous thought suddenly flashed through

his mind: what if Masha's brother and Salman were making themselves cosy in his hut? He remembered how he had given Vitya the whip. He remembered his light-coloured Russian eyes which were as innocent as those of the local children, and he remembered how these eyes had asked him if they were friends. Yes, he might well go there but Salman wouldn't. Vitya might do so because he was trustful. Yerkin had finally found the right word to fit Vitya — trustful.

In his mind's eye Yerkin clearly saw Vitya in the future: he, Yerkin, would be driving his cross-country vehicle across the steppe towards the mountains and would come across a clever dick fixing some complicated scientific equipment by a gopher holes and would at once recognise Vitya although they had not seen each other for years. Vitya would look round and say, "You know, Yerkin, the bluebirds have already migrated here from India. It's time we were planting fodder cacti in the steppe."

Yerkin pushed open the door and walked in.

A pair of trustful eyes looked up at him but they were not Vitya's: Sholpan was sitting at the table. How had she got here? He realised she had come to help in the same simple way she did everything.

He sat down by the door and pulled off his boots,

"We didn't find them."

She went over to the door, took his boots and put them nearer the stove.

"Auntie Naskét's sent some gulash and macaroni for you. Would you like to eat now?"

"Yes."

He ate directly from the frying-pan while Sholpan put a hot tea-pot on the table and sat down opposite.

He drank a cup of tea and propped his sleepy head on his fists.

His day had been too full and he now felt that it was brimming over in the same way as water from an overfull pan brims over and sizzles on the coals below.

He did not notice Sholpan pulling on her plush coat and large scarf. The door opened very slightly, letting in the cold night but not enough to let a person out. Perhaps it was not Sholpan slipping out of the Sadvakasovs' old hut but the spirit of its former mistress whose dresses, jewellery and trinkets lay in a forged trunk in the hut? Everything of here fitted Sholpan perfectly and perhaps she had not left after all?

CHAPTER EIGHT

Salman cautiously lifted the flap of the mattress and heard some loud noise. The lorry was rumbling down a street and he could not jump out because the street was crowded with people.

Shortly afterwards, the driver stopped the lorry and went into a house. Salman checked to see there was nobody in the alley behind, crawled out from under the mattresses, climbed over the side and ran off. A moment later the engine roared up again and some huge gates banged shut behind the lorry.

Salman felt drawn towards the noisy street. He had never seen real-live trolleybuses and trams off the cinema screen before but he did not stop and stare for too long because he knew he would have more time in other towns. Now, however, he did not have a moment to lose.

He picked out the kindest-looking old woman he could spot.

"Excuse me, but could you please help me find the hospital."

"Which one do you need? The children's hospital?"

"Yes," said Salman, nodding his head. He had certainly picked the right old woman: it would never have dawned on him to ask about the children's hospital.

"Go straight on and take the fourth turning to your left..."

Salman knew very well that hospital entrance-gate offices were there to stop people going in and out whenever they liked. However, anyone could get by if he really wanted.

Women with bundles, jam jars and bottles were crowded around the entrance. Salman slipped nimbly past them through the door as if he worked inside. He had already got past the gates and into the yard when someone suddenly called to him,

"Where are you off to? This isn't a visiting day!"

"Who have you got in hospital?" sympathetically asked one of the women with bundles who surrounded Salman.

He wiped his eyes with his fist.

"My brother..."

"What ward's he in?"

"How on earth do I know?"

"Has he got jaundice or dysentery?"

"Nothing. He's fine."

"Well, in that case, what are you..." asked one of the women but another put her arm affectionately round him and said, "You're probably tired and hungry, aren't you? I've brought my daughter a food parcel but they won't take it. You can have it..." she spread out a snow-white napkin on the bench.

He had eaten a big meal at the orphanage that morning but he still tucked in as if he was famished.

At the orphanage he had met all sorts of boys and even a few girls who had run away from home. The warden had said to him in a bored tone, "When you remember your name and where you're from, come and tell me." Then he looked up and asked, "Well, how about it? Are you thinking?" Salman replied truthfully, "Yes, I am." He was thinking very hard how he could run away from the orphanage.

One lad, who was about three years older, than Salman, said, "I'm in the seventh form. I should be in the eighth but I've stayed down a year just because I ran away from home. Can you keep a secret?"

"Yes."

"I want to get to Vladivostok and then board a ship."

Salman did not tell him his secret but described what had happened to Vitya in the train.

That night he could not drop off to sleep because he was worrying so much! "I'm all right, aren't I? Vitya's weaker than me. He's never had to sleep in boiler-rooms or in places full of snakes. He's not used to a hard life. It's no surprise he got so knackered. He was still warm, after all. He couldn't ... But I'm all right, aren't I..."

Then he dreamed the jackdaw flew down from the cupboard in the biology laboratory, kicking the laquered stand away with its claws in the same way as he always kicked off his boots. Then it banged its wings against the window and beat against the glass, trying in vain to get free. Someone ought to open that window, Salman thought but he could not get up from his seat because his feet had been glued to the floor like the bird's feet had been to the stand. He longed to set the bird free but could not move. Then someone guessed what to do and flung open the window. But Salman could not see

against the light who it was. The light got brighter and brighter and his eyes began aching. He covered them with his palms and realised someone had turned on the electric light in the room. It was the warden checking to see everybody was there. The light went out again. At least the bird's free, Salman thought with relief and went back to sleep again.

Next morning as they were eating rissoles and rice at a long table, Salman whispered to his neighbour,

"Let's run away together!"

"You can't run away from here. And anyway... I can't go to Vladivostok now. I'm waiting for my mother to come and get me. They sent her a telegram. I'm going to live at home for a while. But in another six months I'll run off again and get to Vladivostok and join up on a ship."

"Why not go straight to Vladivostok now?" said Salman. "Why drag things out?"

"I feel sorry for my mum..." he turned away and blew his nose. "She always cries when I run away..."

The warden came out onto the porch,

"Aren't you fed up of lazing about? All children go to school except your lot who keep running away from home. Go and do a bit of work. It's time for your mattresses to be disinfected."

In a flash Salman worked out what to do but did not let on and even stayed where he was on the bench.

"What's-your-name, do you need to be specially asked?" snarled the warden.

Salman stood up reluctantly although everything inside him was crying out to be set free like the jackdaw in his dream. His new friend dumped a mattress over Salman who had hidden in the lorry when nobody was looking. He was a good chum

after all. Perhaps some day he would go to Vladivostok with him and then decide what to do. After all, Vladivostok, unlike Chupchi, was somewhere you could enjoy life. But first of all, he had to find Vitya and take him home. There was no point in Vitya running away to Vladivostok.

"What's wrong with your brother, then?" asked the old woman, folding the napkin.

Salman already realised he should say something nearer to the truth.

"He poisoned himself by accident. Some sacks of powder were lying in the shed and he inhaled the stuff. Turned out to be a poison of some sort."

"Then what are you doing here?" gasped the old woman. "Poison casualties are taken to Pasteur Street. Wait a minute, I'll show you which trolleybus to take or you'll get lost."

...The sign on the fence said "Pasteur Street". Old women with bundles were crowded round the entrance. Salman decided not to try slipping through the entrance-gate office but instead went up to the old women to see if he could find out what he wanted to know. And sure enough, they were anxiously discussing a boy in the Ward Seven who was with one of the women's son. The latter had eaten some fish, which had gone off, and poisoned himself. Well, they were saying, after he had had his stomach washed out, the boy was making a steady recovery but the previous evening an unconscious boy had been brought in from the station, and nobody knew who this boy was or where he was from.

So Vitya was in Ward Seven!

The entrance door creaked open. Was Salman

dreaming or was the hospital watchman here really like his old man?

"I've got someone in the Ward Seven. You know, the boy who was brought in with poisoning from the station yesterday..."

"What's he to you?"

"He's my brother!"

"Well, how interesting..." the watchman glanced at him. "Your brother, you say?... You don't reckon I saw that poisoned boy, then? You want to pull a fast one on me, do you? That won't do, it really won't. Brother, my foot! He's fair-haired and you're dark. He's Russian and you're Kazakh... Anyone'll tell you that. So scram — I don't want to see hide or hair of you again! But, come on, own up, what have you got to do with him?"

Salman bared his sharp teeth and snapped, "He's my brother!"

A man in a white raincoat like Nurlan's, carrying a small suitcase, appeared from the hospital yard.

"Could I have a word with you?" called the watchman and glancing at Salman asked, "How's the poisoned lad, doctor?"

"His condition is still giving us cause for concern." The doctor looked at Salman and asked, "And who have we here?"

"He's been hovering by the gates and telling fibs about how he's the boy's brother."

"Why're you so sure he's fibbing?" asked the doctor. "You say you're his brother?" he asked Salman in a completely serious tone.

"We were on our way to Granny," replied Salman joyfully.

"You were travelling together? That's good to know. Well, let's go and see your brother." He put his hand gently on Salman's shoulder and guided

him through the entrance-gate office and into the hospital yard. "Your brother's in a bad way. We should send a telegram asking your mother to come here. Or your grandmother, if you'd prefer. Will you tell me her address?"

"No. If you make my brother better, he'll tell you himself."

"I see, so that's an ultimatum, is it?"

Salman did not understand the question and so he kept silent.

"So it was you who did a bunk from the orphanage today?"

"So what?" muttered Salman.

"If you don't mind, I'll ring and tell them to stop looking for you and that you'll be spending the night here..."

In a small white-washed room the young doctor put on a white coat and gave Salman a pair of hospital pyjamas. A white telephone was standing on a white table. Salman could hear what was being said on the other end of the line:

"Look, you don't know what these kids are like but we do! It's all a pack of lies! He'll give you the slip, too. We know these runaway kids inside out. Yes, they're always on their way to their kind old grannies!"

The young doctor objected strongly to these arguments,

"Look, I'm responsible for him! I tell you, he won't ever leave his brother! Their address? No, he hasn't given me that yet. His name?" he covered the receiver with his hand and looked questioningly at Salman.

"Sasha," Salman said reluctantly.

"He's called Sasha. He'll be a great help to me now... The other lad? He's still in a bad way. What's

his surname?" He covered the receiver again with his hand. "Will you tell me your brother's surname?"

"Make him better and he'll tell you himself," replied Salman stubbornly.

He was absolutely certain that if Vitya recovered in hospital, he would tell them everything himself. They could do what they liked with Salman but they still would not get a word out from him. Vitya's father was a colonel and division commander. His name and address could not be given out to anyone. On no account could Salman, who was a thief, get the colonel's name mixed up in this unpleasant business. Vitya's father had a scar on his chest from a German bullet and bad news of any sort could endanger his health. The Stepanovs had already suffered on account of Uncle Lyosha who had died of his war wounds after the war. It was Salman's duty to keep silent. When Vitya got better, he would tell them himself and then they would realise Vitya was not a thief. If Salman had been alone, it would not have mattered if he was called a thief because his family's reputation was already ruined but now he was with Vitya, who was not a Mazitov, and therefore for the time being Salman had to remain anonymous. He had said his name was Sasha and that was enough to go on with.

Vitya was lying behind a glass partition and his face was blue and distant-looking. Salman tightly gripped the iron railing of his bed, showing that he was there to stay but nobody tried to make him go away. A stool was pushed forward for him to sit on and he sat down and watched the blood dripping down glass tubes and a long needle being inserted

into Vitya's arm and a light-coloured liquid disappearing from a glass phial.

During the night he went out into the corridor and woke up the night nurse who was dozing at a table.

"Write down the address! Cable his mother!"

"Everyone's asleep. Go to bed. Look, that sofa over there's been made up for you."

When he looked through the glass partition the next morning, the young doctor saw Salman sitting on the stool, wide awake.

"What a character the little devil's got!" he thought to himself.

Salman did not miss the moment when the face on the pillow began to show signs of life and looked bewildered for a second.

"Salman ... you're alive..." he uttered joyfully.

Tears began running down Salman's cheeks and he whooped with laughter.

"Give him something to calm him down!" ordered the doctor.

The Stepanovs were up all night. Natalia Petrovna began complaining of severe chest pains and Maria Semyonovna rushed over and gave her an injection and started calling Salman Mazitov every name under the sun. Punctually, every hour Korotun telephoned to tell them there was no news.

Masha had hidden Vitya's satchel in her room so that nobody would catch sight of it and become even more upset. She had taken everything out of his satchel and assured herself that all his books were clean and tidy and that there were no clues to explain why he had ran away from Chupchi with Salman. It then became increasingly obvious

to Masha that she was personally to blame for everything that had happened. In fact, it was her fault more than anybody else's for although she was Vitya's sister, she had not suspected anything at all.

Snow fell during the night and flew over the steppe as if afraid to touch the ground.

In the dim morning light Masha caught sight of Yerkin in a long shaggy sheepskin coat waiting for her by the school gates.

"If you had not come," said Yerkin, "I would have gone straight over to your place to see you."

He did not ask her about her brother because he realised without asking that he had not yet been found. They went into the classroom together. Masha felt that the others greeted them rather cautiously. Saulé got up from her seat and came over to them.

"Masha!" she said loudly enough for the rest to hear. "My mother and..." she hesitated slightly, "and my father asked me to pass on their apologies to your parents. A terrible mistake's been made. Your brother had nothing to do with it..."

The others joyfully rushed out of their seats and surrounded Masha, Yerkin and Saulé on all sides.

"Well said, Saulé!"

Yerkin was the only one to disapprove.

"You've had your moment of glory, haven't you? Well, that will do!" he muttered. He did not like the cold and direct way in which Saulé had apologised to Masha. More than anything else in the world he longed at that moment to take Masha by the hand and lead her away.

But Faridá had already leapt onto the desk in her red boots.

"Masha! Saulé!" she cried. "Why, this is fantastic! Go on, shake hands!"

"Why, they haven't quarrelled, have they?" Yerkin heard Kolya ask in surprise.

Kolya leaned over the others' shoulders and tried to drag Faridá down from her command post but did not manage in time. Masha stretched out her open hand towards Saulé. As the others looked keenly on, they solemnly shook hands and slowly let their hands go as if they had done what was necessary and nothing else was required of them.

Yerkin did not like the way they shook hands. Kolya was right: Masha and Saulé had not quarrelled and, generally speaking, nothing had happened between them — it were Salman's horrible pranks and spiteful behaviour, Vitya had nothing to do with them for that matter... Yerkin knew that something had gone wrong: in such a serious matter they had suddenly done what Faridá had suggested.

He did not even wish to think about what a hard time proud Saulé was now having and did not pause even for a moment to work out who was right and who was wrong. The only thing he knew for certain was that he had to protect Masha.

The morning light slowly became brighter outside. The electric light, which was kept on during the first lesson, grew yellower and duller and, as usual, the night light retreated under pressure from the daylight and crept inside the glass bulbs hanging from the ceiling. Everybody had forgotten to switch them off but then all-seeing Seraphima Gavrilovna came in and complained,

"What's the light doing on so late in the morning?" She stretched her hand towards the switch and the day finally triumphed. "Masha! I've just had a phone call from the cantonment. Our 'travellers' have been found!"

Yerkin felt as if he had gone from one life to another. He had stayed the same while everything around him now seemed strange and unusual. And the steppe where he had wandered with Masha after school, was different, too; they walked across the pathless black and white ground as if on another planet where Yerkin had never set foot before. There was a long time to go before spring when the green steppe would be a sea of scarlet poppies which you could dive into from saddle... But Masha had never been in the steppe in springtime.

"You know, I'm most to blame: I'm his sister, after all, but I suspected absolutely nothing... You know, I heard the door-bell ring that day but I thought... I was furious with Salman although he didn't do it on purpose... I was born on a train, you know, and somehow that's left a mark on my character..." She told him about all the things which mattered most to her, which she took for granted and which she never hid but, on the other hand, which she never told without a purpose: about Musab and the bright-coloured hoopoe bird and the smell of the bonfire which was the same in Chupchi, about Uncle Lyosha who had saved her father's life and who had died of his war wounds after the war. "Daddy can't forgive himself for not making him have an operation... Now we've got nobody left in the world. That's probably hard for you to understand, coming from such a large family with such strong roots. It's wonderful to be the branch of a strong tree..."

Yerkin also told her about many things, and shared memories with her which flooded back of their own accord: how he and his little chums had played at being the Kazakh national hero, Khadji-Mukan; how satellites flew over the steppe; how the

blue mobile shop would show up at their yurt and his father would enjoy spending money in it; how in the evenings gangs of boys would gallop over to the cinema at the Kirghiz shepherds' settlement twenty odd kilometres away...

There was nobody beside the two of them in the steppe but Yerkin was constantly aware of somebody's stern gaze: it was as if the newly-transformed steppe was staring at them through all its eyes, demanding to know who they were and why they were sharing so many memories and where they were heading, so far away from home...

On many occasions Yerkin had observed the changes which took place in the steppe during the winter, spring and summer, and also the changes, which were accomplished by people's labour but this was the first time he had realised that there were other changes which took place inexplicably.

Between the *aul* and the cantonment there stood a mausoleum made in the traditional manner of unglazed manure bricks except for its iron mesh door. This mausoleum had been commissioned by the local authorities and the door skilfully built by the local smithie, Kolya Kudaibergenov's father. It was here that Sadyk, Nurlan's grandfather was buried.

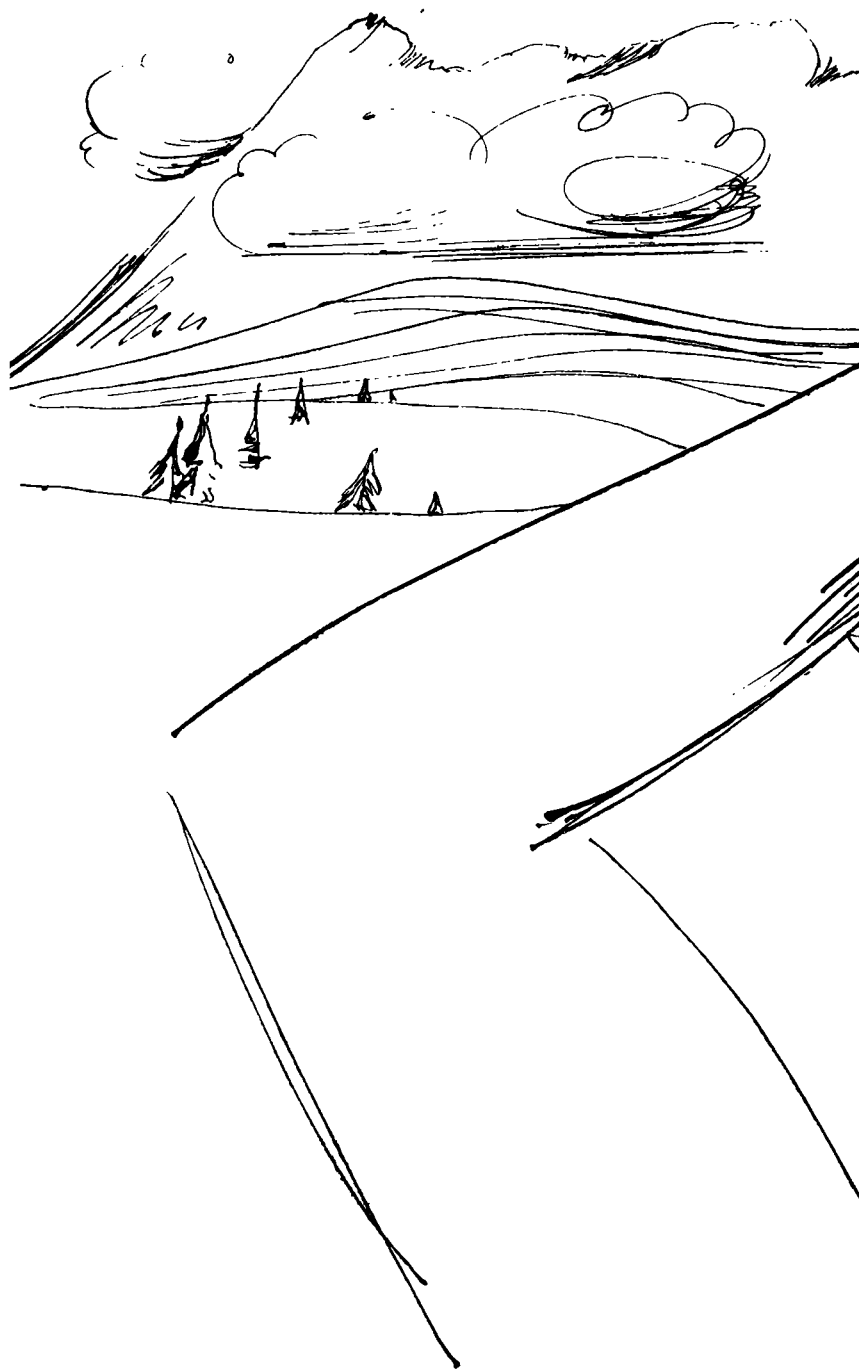
"I've already peeped inside," said Masha. "You're allowed to go inside, aren't you?"

"Yes, let's."

The iron door, which had been painted blue, creaked cantankerously. They inhaled the chilled clay dust and dry snow. "Aminá" had been scratched on the wall.

"What's on your mind?" asked Masha. "It's colder here than in the wind. Shall we go back outside?"

Yerkin leant back against the blue iron door and gazed into her light-coloured trustful eyes which seemed so close...



WINTER



CHAPTER ONE

Masha's parents were puzzled why she did not invite Museké's son round. Faridá, Kolya and Nurlan used to call and see them but Yerkin never did.

He did not visit them because almost every evening he would wander round the steppe by the cantonment, waiting for Masha to flash her green desk light on and off to show that she would shortly run out to see him.

They had been sharing memories together and for the first time both of them realised that fourteen years was a very long time. They had lived fourteen long years without knowing anything about each other. If you put their two ages together, you got twenty-eight years, half of which Yerkin had spent in the steppe he now knew so well and the other half of which Masha had spent travelling on trains and planes between the Chukotka Peninsula and the Volga River.

Yerkin knew everything about the steppe but when Masha asked, for instance, if Nurlan's family kept ewes, too, he found himself blushing as he explained that they kept gelded rams and why it was profitable for them to geld rams.

When Masha could not understand the simplest of things, he felt as if he was covering the same old ground while she was miles away from him again.

Everything was exactly the same at the Stepanovs except for a disturbing little draught, which suddenly appeared in the apartment. You could not hear or see it but whenever you came in from outside, some-

thing uncanny told you that it had just been in the room.

People used to believe in omens; for instance, if your stove pipe whined, it meant you would soon be moving. Stove pipes are now things of the past and it's hard to believe in the creaking sounds radiators make at night, isn't it?

No order had yet been given: there had not even been an order to prepare another order. The only thing, which perhaps gave cause for apprehension, was that someone somewhere had said to General Karpenko, "And what if Stepanov were to be sent?"

But nobody knew whether the common Russian surname, Stepanov, had been pronounced in an indecisive, positive or negative tone.

Perhaps someone had said that Stepanov's daughter was in the eighth form and that Stepanov, of course, would be delighted if she were to spend her last two years at a school in a large town. And, generally speaking, Chupchi was not the sort of place one felt sad to leave, was it? Yes, Chupchi certainly wasn't paradise.

Well, so much the disturbing little draught that had entered the household.

When Colonel Stepanov was given a new posting, for various reasons they sometimes had to wait up to six months for a call to follow on.

* * *

The colonel went to see the headmaster and intercede for Salman.

"His family's future depends on him, if you ask me.

His younger brothers and sisters, of course, have a better chance of making it in life. It's very bad for a child to have it drummed into his head from a very early age that he's different from everyone else and worse than the others..."

"But what will happen to Mazitov when your family leaves here? After all, you will be leaving, won't you? And you won't take him with you, will you?"

"Well... We may leave suddenly. As for taking Salman with us, I'm sure he would not want to himself. After all, he was born here and his roots are in Chupchi. I'm sure everybody longs to be where his roots are. You may complain about the place you were born in but you don't like it if anyone else does."

"You're not the first one to take stand up for him. Saulé Dospayeva has already been to see me."

"I wasn't aware of that. She's a kind soul."

"The soul is a Christian concept. In the East one speaks of a watchful heart. A person with excellent eye-sight but a blind heart is bound to lose his way but a blind man with a watchful heart will always keep on the right track." The headmaster paused for breath and then said in a more official tone, "I shall ask the teachers' council to give Mazitov another chance to make amends. Salman Mazitov, in my opinion, will not ask for anything himself. He has never asked the school for anything. He considers he has been legally entitled to everything the school has given him over the past five years."

As he was going home from the school, Stepanov wondered why he had been so sure that Salman would not want to leave his native *aul*. After all, he had

never spoken to him about it. Then he realised he had said so because his Masha longed so much to go back and live in the small town where all the Stepanovs had once come from...

CHAPTER TWO

Never before, not even in the fiercest snow-storm, had Salman felt cold but here he was on a calm evening shivering from head to foot. Especially his back felt chilled. He knew that you first felt danger in your spine, even if you met it head on.

He gazed at the clear night sky and the faint winter stars and the thin sickle moon which was always a sure sign of trouble brewing.

Vitya, who knew all about astronomy, had explained that when the moon was shaped like a "c", it was old and on the way out, and if it was turned back to front, it was new and on the way in. However, he had no idea what it meant when the moon was lying on its back and rocking to and fro. Something uncanny told him that it was a bad omen. It did not necessarily mean, however, that there was going to be a snow-storm or a thaw in mid-winter after which the steppe would be covered by a sheer sheet of ice and the livestock would not be able to paw their way to their fodder on the ground. It was the shepherds who had to worry about that sort of thing but he could not care two straws if a snow-storm was on the way. Salman's omens were only of importance to him personally.

The moon emerged from the mist, a knife was

clenched in his fist—no, it was a bad omen, all right.

The windows of the school-hall shone yellow, the headmaster's study was filled with green light, like an aquarium, shadows were dancing on the walls and all the classrooms were black. By the porch stood an army bus which had brought the soldiers, who had received the best reports, to the school dance from the cantonment.

Salman stood for a while by the fence and listened to the music. He knew Vitya's sister was in there, too. The lieutenant who took the soldiers to the school always called for her on the way there and dropped her home on the way back. During the evening, however, the lieutenant would never go up and speak to her. Salman was not sure whether this was a good thing or not. He no longer wanted to have anything to do with her or even think about her. The soldiers were dancing with the tenth-formers and Volodya, the diplomat's son, was bound to invite Saulé for a dance and Sholpan too just to be polite. The lieutenant would either be sitting next to the Head or setting an example by dancing a waltz with Seraphima Gavrilovna. What a laugh it was to watch her galloping round on tiptoe and fanning herself with a handkerchief. Like Salman, Seraphima Gavrilovna had eyes in the back of her head and itching ears. She wanted to marry the new English teacher off to the lieutenant because she knew that if the teacher did not marry him, she would leave Chupchi at the end of the year. However, it was already obvious that her match-making would come to nothing. She should consult Salman for

he could tell her a thing or two! But he knew that she never would. And anyway, before long Salman would know nothing for it would soon be time for him to keep his mouth shut.

As he drew near his house, he saw a light shining through a flowery piece of material which had been hung across the small window. He pushed open the door and realised at once why the light was on and why his mother's blouse was covering the window: a stranger was sitting at the table and eating voraciously. He could not have been there long because black pool of water was on the floor under his boots. So that was why the sickle moon had landed upside down and why he was shivering! The visitor had not simply dropped in on the off-chance: he had been sent by his father!

Salman kicked off his boots by the door, threw off his coat, slid sideways along the white-washed wall towards his bed and climbed under the blanket next to his younger brothers and sisters. It was nice and cosy in there because the children had warmed it, there was a sickly nursery-school smell of semolina under the padded blanket. Salman felt that his cheeks were wet. He ran his hand across them, licked his palm and tasted salt.

"Life's just so unfair! I don't care if you don't feel sorry for me! But why can't the little ones grow up in peace?"

He lay perfectly still, as if he had gone straight off to sleep, the way children do. Then he lifted the edge of the blanket slightly and watched the stranger's Adam's apple bobbing up and down and his jaws grinding away as he chewed the food.

The likes of him would not have a second thought about cutting anyone's throat! The stranger must have come from where his father was now. His father must have given him his family's address and he was bound to have got something out of it — Salman knew his father like the back of his hand. If he had not taken money, he would certainly have taken something else. And it was easy to guess why the stranger had needed an address in Chupchi and not somewhere closer and more pleasant. He needed somewhere to sit snug and hide — that was why!

"I'll kill him!" hissed Salman as tears of anger rolled down his cheeks.

The stranger finished eating and sat glumly at the table, staring round at his new hideout. He would not have followed the address up if he had not had the rare chance of slipping out of the train nearby. Now all he had to do was to sit tight and wait for the search in the neighbourhood to finish, and then he could work out what to do next.

The stranger seemed to sense Salman's stare for he kept twitching and turning round.

Salman climbed out from under his blanket, went over to the bucket of water, ladled out some water with a piece of dried pumpkin rind and drank his fill. He did everything slowly on purpose.

"Now scram!" ordered the stranger. "Go to sleep!"

Salman bared his teeth and snapped,

"Why should I?"

"I'm not in the habit of repeating myself!"

"Go to bed, dear!" said his mother in a pathetic

and cowardly tone from over in a corner.

"All right, I'll go to bed," replied Salman, pretending to be obedient. "I'll go when he's left."

"Salman, your father sent him..."

Salman kept his eyes trained on the stranger.

"We don't need anything from father," he said coldly.

He could feel the sweat trickling down his back and ribs.

Sweat is caused by three things: fatigue, pain and hard labour.

At that moment Salman did not feel physically tired or sick. What he now had in mind demanded as much energy as trying to move a huge pile of stones. It was as if he was lifting one stone after another and throwing each one aside. He knew that if he kept going the stranger was bound to leave.

"And what if I don't leave?" asked his father's guest. "You'll squeal on me?"

"Afraid?" asked Salman, making a wry face.

The stranger stood up and stuck his hand in his pocket. Salman caught sight of the sharp edge of a sickle moon. Dripping with sweat, he kept doing something that demanded more energy than any other work in the world: he was saving his family and his home. The stranger's Adam's apple quivered as he stuck the knife into the loaf of bread on the table, cut off half and shoved it inside his coat.

"I'll be back soon," he said threateningly from the doorway. "I'll just get a bit of fresh air."

The door banged and his mother began sobbing quietly into her pillow. Salman wiped his lips with his palm, trying to take the grin off his face, and

went over to the light switch on the right side of the door. He flicked it and stood listening in the silent darkness, his ear pressed against the plank boards: the stranger was still standing in the entrance, breathing heavily and scraping the floor with his feet. Who felt like leaving a warm house and going out into the bleak steppe at this time of night? Keeping his ear pressed to the freezing cold boards, which picked up every sound, Salman slid the bolt into its socket as far as it would go and jumped aside. The stranger wouldn't get inside now without making a racket and that was the last thing he wanted! He'd set off all the dogs in the street.

His bare feet were frozen and so he slipped into his boots. Was the stranger still standing outside? Yes. No, he was walking away and the snow was crunching underfoot.

"Where's he off to now?" Salman muttered and almost howled in frustration because he had acted foolishly by letting the stranger slip off unguarded to roam round the *aul*.

He grabbed his hat and coat, pushed back the bolt, raced outside. And caught sight of the stranger's back swaying slightly beyond the low clay wall. The new moon was shining feebly. Salman waited to see what would happen next.

The stranger had not been seriously frightened by Mazitov's snotty-nosed kid. He knew that it would do him no harm to stroll round Chupchi for awhile and have a look at everything there and then go back when the kid was asleep. He was not, however, very keen on going back. Mazitov had misinformed him. It wasn't such a safe place

to hide and the *aul* was rather too bare for his liking. And, anyway, he did not benefit from its being near the railway because at every station there were always plenty of people ready to pounce on anyone like him fitting the description they had received in cables. What's more, both passenger and freight trains alike were thoroughly searched. As it was not a major railway and only had one track, this was not hard to do. On the other hand, there were plenty of other ways of getting across the steppe. In a car you could cover about five hundred kilometres overnight and, if you were lucky, cross into another republic. So, the only immediate problem was getting hold of a vehicle. Yes, what he had to do now was take over a nice warm lorry, dump its driver in the back and not on the road, of course, and get the hell out of here. Its engine had to be running because he could not steal a stationary vehicle without making too much noise...

The stranger swung away from the clay wall and strode off with Salman hot on his trail. The streets were deserted. However, Salman knew something the stranger did not: that night Seraphima Gavrilovna had organised a New Year party for the senior classes at the school.

* * *

Seraphima Gavrilovna was so powerful, she not only decreed that New Year's Eve would be on the twenty-ninth instead of the thirty-first of December, but also that it would end at ten

o'clock instead of midnight, thereby proving she was in control of the hours as well as the days.

Kolya Kudaibergenov had been posted by the school doors to foil all the younger children's attempts to slip inside. Kolya made an exceptionally reliable watchman for he never let anybody outtrick him.

Exceptionally unreliable Nurlan, on the other hand, busied himself pinning paper numbers to the party-goers' fronts. Anybody else in his shoes would have blushed with shame but he could not care two straws.

The day before, the young trendy English teacher had tried to convince Seraphima Gavrilovna that party games were now old-hat but nothing she said had the slightest impact. Defending a game in which all the players wrote anonymous notes to one another, Seraphima Gavrilovna argued, "Of course, you and I have nobody to write to and nothing to write about! I wonder what I would say to you in a note? I'd probably ask you to hand in your lesson plans for next term in time! And you'd write back asking me for an extra week, wouldn't you? Incidentally, that reminds me, please hand in your plans after the party, tomorrow, I mean. And please don't spoil the children's fun. I assure you that at their age it's great fun exchanging notes. And don't forget there'll be soldiers at the party. Let them write what they like! The main thing is to keep an eye on them all the time!"

The English teacher did not let cheeky Nurlan pin a paper number to her dress but as soon as she set foot inside, Faridá bounded up to her in a cardboard

postwoman's hat with a cardboard post-bag on her side and said, "Here's a letter for you!" The teacher opened the note and read, "You look very charming tonight." For an instant, which she would later remember with embarrassment, the young teacher looked round the hall, searching for someone with her eyes.

In the other corner of the hall Faridá handed another note to Lieutenant Ryabov which read, "Why aren't you dancing?"

From her key position in the corner Seraphima Gavrilovna put a mental tick by Faridá's name. Apart from the lieutenant she had not found any other suitable fiancés for the young teacher and young unmarried teachers did not stay long in Chupchi as a rule.

They had certainly picked the right person to handle the post! Faridá had all her time taken up delivering notes. She had brought some from home which were suitable for every kind of situation. She had spent several evenings composing them with and without the help of romantic novels. She also had some simpler ones along the lines of "You look very charming tonight", "Why aren't you dancing?", "Who are you longing for?" and a few more enigmatic ones. She kept everything secret even from her best friend, Masha.

She, too, had a fascinating time because she was controlling all the strings. As a favour, she handed Sholpan a note saying, "You're lovely tonight", but the latter had no time to wonder who it was from. In the cramped room backstage she was nimbly fixing ribbons, frills, braids and pheasant feathers

to the dresses of six girl boarders who were going to perform a Moldavian and then a Kazakh folk dances. As it was up to Sholpan to get them ready to skip out onto the stage, in little feathered hats and velvet dresses and then, a few minutes later, in ribboned crowns and embroidered blouses. Askar would also be performing for the senior classes that evening. Sholpan had ironed the little soloist's school suit and starched his shirt and he looked just like a little tortoise tucked inside a shell.

The biology laboratory also served as the performers' dressing-room. Vitya and Salman's jackdaw looked down coldly at all the commotion from its stand on the cupboard and at Seraphima Gavrilovna who was instructing Saulé on how the concert should be handled. Saulé was feeling very cheerful that evening even though she had received a note from sly Faridá asking her who she was longing for.

All the notes Faridá had composed at home had already been distributed but her postbag was already bursting with new ones. What always mattered was to get everything off to a good start.

The curtains parted and Saulé stepped forwards in a dark-blue dress with a delicate white lace collar.

"And now here's Nurlan Akatov from the eighth B form."

A few people laughed spitefully and clapped half-heartedly.

Nurlan arrogantly tossed back his ginger hair and announced,

"I'm going to sing you a song which I wrote myself and dedicated to my friend, Kolya Kudaiberge-nov."

Kolya blushed to the roots of his hair and fidgeted in his seat.

"The song is about two Red cavalrymen," added Nurlan, lifting his guitar. He stared at the audience and began strumming with all his fingers, and all of a sudden, as if by magic, the sounds of a dombra and of hooves thundering across the steppe rang out.

Two cavalrymen, one Russian, the other Kazakh, were galloping along side by side, discussing how to solve a problem. You see, they had thought of swapping overcoats but they were different sizes. What about them swapping boots? No, that was no good either. So what could they swop then? Names? No, they had been given them by their mothers. What else then?.. They galloped across the steppe and it suddenly occurred to them to swop surnames. Why not? After all, both were equally good. But what about them swapping fates, too? Yes, that would be a fair swop, too, because both were equal and as yet unknown. Later, however, one was killed and the other galloped on alone. Who was he? We did not know because we had not seen his face. Then the Red cavalryman galloped alone across the steppe and across his native land and the thundering of hooves faded into the distance...

Nurlan lowered his guitar and his ginger forelock flopped over his eyes as he bowed his head.

Thunderous applause roared through the air above the rows where the young soldiers were seated. Volodya Muromtsev winked approvingly at Nurlan and Lieutenant Ryabov leaned towards the headmaster and whispered, "Well, what do you think? He's certainly a talented young lad, isn't he!" It was

obvious what the headmaster was thinking from the expression on his wrinkled face, which Nurlan could see even from where he was sitting on the stage: what a shame Nature had so foolishly wasted such wonderful talent on such a worthless person!

Major Korotun was not there to hear the moving song which his former chum, Nurlan Akatov, had written. What a pity it was since he was the only person who had seriously taken him to task and who would never shake hands with him again, was not there to hear him. All the others, including his closest friend, Kolya, still could not treat him as anything more than a joke. Yes, the only person who had been truly offended and infuriated by Akatov and had told him that he would never shake hands with him again. He wanted to sing the song about the two cavalymen to Korotun for he knew the major would appreciate and be deeply moved by it...

Who would ever have thought that Nurlan Akatov, alias Rusty Nail, would suddenly feel sad that the major was not present in the school-hall when he was singing a song he had composed himself?

It would never even have occurred to Faridá who was sitting next to Masha in the hall and waiting for the right moment to change places with Yerkin behind them. The boys knew that the girls liked going everywhere in pairs but what they did not know was that they went in pairs so that one of them could suddenly disappear, vanish, melt into thin air, or for no reason at all suddenly want to change places in a hall: "Yerkin, swop with me! That's not too much to ask, is it?"

Yerkin did not approve of Masha's friendship

with Faridá but, as he did not want to argue with her, he so meekly changed places.

Nurlan looked at him from the stage and grinned. Yerkin began hoping and praying that Nurlan would not start singing his favourite old romance for it was so desperately mournful and sad.

Saulé came out of the wings to announce the next performer but Nurlan beat her to it and began strumming the melancholy tune:

"An old Russian romance with music by Bula-khov," he said, pronouncing the "u" in the composer's name like an "o" in the Kazakh manner.

Saulé did not want to look foolish and go back without saying anything so she stood by Nurlan while he sang the song in a light and happy way as if he was singing it only for her. In her delicate lace collar she looked more beautiful and proud than ever before and the melancholy tune and words seemed to apply to her more than anyone else in Chupchi. You see, the song and its words had been written long ago in her great-grandfather's heyday when he had gone to balls in a black smoking-jacket or officer's uniform and bowed to a young lady with beautiful bare shoulders in a lace ball-gown.

Oh, what a pity the major wasn't there!

After all, Nurlan wasn't singing so that Volodya fell head over heels in love with Saulé.

CHAPTER THREE

Pasha Kolesnikov drove as fast as he could with due consideration, firstly, for the bad winter road conditions, secondly, for the grey mist which had

developed and, thirdly, for his friend and neighbour Ajanbergen, who was sitting in the back, banging every now and then on the cabin roof. Ajanbergen, Katya's husband, seemed to have gone mad for he kept banging to make him either hurry or slow down. Surely he realised Pasha knew himself that Katya was sitting next to him in the cabin, groaning and bending double over her large belly.

"Not long now, Katerina!" said Pasha, trying to comfort her. Katerina was the Russian version of her Kazakh name, Khadichá, but her husband preferred Katya or Katiusha.

Chupchi's tiny lights were already gleaming in the distance. The lorry's headlights lit up a soldier and a girl embracing on the road. If you met a soldier with a girl on the way, it meant that a dance was going on at the school. Pasha was not called Magellan for nothing don't forget!

The girl hid her face from the light in her boyfriend's army coat. What better place could she have found to hide! The soldier looked round to see who the devil was racing along with full headlights at this time of night. The whites of his eyes flashed and Pasha at once recognised Lyovka, dipped his lights as a favour and peeped his horn to wish him good luck.

Pasha recalled the rumour that had been going around about Lyovka trying to ditch Aminá and shaking his head, wondered whatever people would think up next!

Then he spotted someone in a pea-jacket, boots and a fur hat with long ear-flaps and thought, no, mate, you're not from the school dance! You probably

set off to hike somewhere and then changed your mind. Well, what can you expect of a drunk!

At any other time Pasha would not have minded stopping and giving the fellow a lift to the *aul* but now he roared past at top speed because he was in a hurry to get the woman to hospital to give birth and he knew that the fellow would get to the *aul* which was only a stone's throw away.

Pasha did not notice Salman squatting in the shadows by some bushes.

The stranger had kept Salman on his toes all the time, now creeping along, now striding boldly along and even running towards this vehicle. Salman could not understand why he was taking such a risk.

Salman spotted Uncle Pasha from Thaelmann at the wheel as the lorry thundered past. A woman wrapped up in a shawl was sitting in the passenger's seat and someone was banging and shouting in the plywood-covered back for him to go slower.

Now he understood why Uncle Pasha, who always gave lifts, had not stopped this time: he was taking the woman to hospital.

He still had to work out why the stranger had been walking along cautiously keeping clear of lights and then had suddenly rushed towards the lorry and then stopped, lost his nerve or perhaps changed his mind at the last moment. Yes, he'd see to it that skunk lost his nerve! He had it coming to him! He obviously had a plan but it had misfired because he had rushed forwards and then stopped. But what would he have done if Uncle Pasha had been alone? Without the woman in the shawl? And without the person or people (who knew how many of them

there were) banging in the back of the lorry?

He could tell from its lights that the lorry was heading towards the hospital. The stranger cut across the steppe in the same direction with Salman on his heels.

Sure enough, Uncle Pasha's lorry was standing by the hospital entrance-gate office with its engine running. The stranger hovered in the shadows round the corner. The entrance door banged and somebody came out. Salman crept closer and recognised Ajanbergen, a shepherd from Thaelmann.

"They refused to take it," he said, slinging the soft bundle into the back of the lorry.

Pasha jumped down from the lorry and asked,

"Well, it won't be long now, will it?"

"Why don't you go and ask her yourself!"

"Who? Katya?"

"No, the midwife! While I was still there she asked Katya who her mother and grandmother were and cheered her up by saying all the women in Katya's family had had easy deliveries. And she also asked Katya whether she was going to grin and bear it or was going to scream. Russian women always scream, she said, and have an easier time of it. Kazakh women keep quiet because that's how they prefer it. She asked Katya whether she was called Kate-rina or Khadichá and then told me to leave."

"Well, and what are we going to do now?"

"I'll sit and wait because it all might be over soon."

Salman saw Ajanbergen get out his cigarettes and offer Pasha one and then they both lit up.

"I've heard, you know," Ajanbergen went on,

"in the old days the husband had to walk round and round his yurt while his wife was giving birth."

"If you like, we'll drive round the hospital!" joked Pasha.

"You've done enough already! Go and sleep. Where are you going to spend the night?"

"At Sadvakasov's. But I can't very well go there when he's not there yet. There's a dance on at the school tonight and Yerkin's bound to be there." Pasha walked round the lorry, kicking its tyres with his boot. "Let's drive over to the school and see what's going on there."

"No, I'd better keep an eye on things here," replied Ajanbergen, flicking away his cigarette end and its red tip struck the road and left a trail of tiny sparks.

"Well, I think I'll drive over to the school and see how the younger generation are getting on. I can chat to some of my chums there." Pasha climbed back into the driver's seat and put his foot on the clutch. "Good luck! When Katya gives birth, pass on my congratulations." The door slammed and the lorry moved off.

Salman somehow knew that the stranger would go after the lorry and, of course, head for the school. What a skunk he was! So that was how he aimed to get out of Chupchi — in a lorry. But nobody in his right mind would give a lift heaven knows where to a stranger on a dark night. So that meant he was not just looking for a lift, the skunk!..

Salman felt as if he was well and truly in the stranger's clutches. The rats had a knack of keeping you under their thumbs! You could wriggle as much as

you liked but you just couldn't get free. Here was Salman trudging across the steppe after a flickering shadow and every now and then in his mind's eye he saw the stranger's strong jaws chewing and his large Adam's apple bobbing up and down. He kept shouting to himself, "Don't let him go now, Salman! Don't let him go! Don't be caught napping! Not much longer to go!"

The stranger sneaked off the road into the steppe to lie in waiting. Two people passed nearby without noticing him. It was Aminá strolling with her soldier and, of course, they did not have eyes for anyone else. That's tough luck on Isabek, thought Salman, grinning, for he had not forgotten how he had got into hot water with Isabek for carrying notes to Aminá from Lyovka.

* * *

The stranger still had not sensed that Salman was behind him for he walked along without looking round. Thus, as if attached by a string, they threaded their way along the streets and over the wasteland in the *aul*. Now a door would open and a strip of light would appear; now steps would ring out in the dark along a crooked bumpy lane; now a radio would blare out somewhere... Salman and the stranger walked past the houses of villagers, who were settling down for the night but who were still troubled by all the daily cares and concerns of life. They walked on and on without meeting or being spotted by anyone. Even the strips of light, which suddenly appeared, seemed to be avoiding them both. It was as if the *aul* had one life and the two of them had a

completely different one as they stole quietly like shadows round Chupchi.

Salman recalled how Vitya had told him about a science fiction story he had once read: the inhabitants of various planets met and it appeared that they could walk through one another because each of them was an empty space for the other. The writer's idea was to show that the inhabitants of different planets were made of different materials, which were not as different as air and stone, say, but which had absolutely nothing in common. At the time Salman had not thought much of this muddling situation which had greatly appealed to Vitya. But as he was walking along now, tied, as it were, to the stranger, by a string, he realised that there really were such things as different lives, in which one person could pass through another and that this was not simply a figment of the writer's imagination. What's more, they did not exist just somewhere far off on other planets but here, on Earth, in Chupchi. He wondered in horror if he was made of the same material as the stranger and if that was why he was passing through other people and houses which led completely different lives.

* * *

In a quiet spot behind the school some tenth-formers had gathered together to sort out something important.

What exactly this was, Yerkin guessed at once when Isabek asked him to go behind the school with him.

Isabek was considered Chupchi's top wrestler. Nobody could throw him. You could tell by his physique that all his forebears had been nomadic horsemen: he had a long torso and short bandy legs. He looked wonderful on horseback but too short-legged when he was standing. But to make up for that, he stood like a rock on his feet and was exceptionally good at stretching out and grasping things with his hands.

Yerkin had seen Isabek deal quickly with his opponents on many an occasion. In summer he would throw them onto the springy grass and in winter onto dusty mats in the school gymnasium. Yerkin was learning the art of wrestling from him but the latter was too proud to let his young cousin ever beat him and always ended up pinning him to the ground. There was nothing Isabek enjoyed more than showing how strong he was. However, in wrestling there comes a moment or, rather, a split second when you realise who you're up against. Once you've got the upperhand, what do you do then? You either keep your opponent down and prolong your victory and your opponent's defeat or you break off the fight at once and let your opponent get up because you are not enemies and you have both proved who's the stronger and that's all that matters.

Yerkin knew that Isabek had never prolonged his victory or his opponent's defeat but, on the contrary, always let him get up at once. He would walk away, smiling shyly as if he had never been aware of his own strength.

Isabek was kind but hot-tempered, sluggish but easily incensed. Even since he was a small boy, he

had broken in the wildest horses in his father's herd and turned them into the gentlest rides. If you asked him how a mare returned to the herd with her foal for the first time, Isabek would never think of how best to describe this in word but would look around and then point at a mare walking proudly but warily along, tenderly watching her foal hurrying along behind her and tripping over all his four legs. Isabek was wonderfully sensitive to all living creatures. But who really knew what he was like? Certainly not Aminá. Yerkin disliked her intensely for being so incredibly stupid as not to see what a genuine fellow Isabek was.

The *aul's* top wrestler was standing behind the school with a crowd of shepherds' sons from the tenth A form.

"The soldier's not going to turn up. He's too scared to," swaggered Kabish, the smallest and puniest of them all who for this reason enjoyed other people's fights most. He was hovering by the corner, peeping at the school porch and suddenly began quivering excitedly and squeaking, "Here he comes! He's on his own!" Then he drawled disappointedly, "Oh, it's not Lyovka, it's somebody else! Lyovka's chickened out!"

Yerkin recognised the soldier walking towards the tenth-formers behind the school as the fair-haired fellow from Moscow, Volodya, who was in charge of the group of soldiers who had come to the party.

Nobody had any idea why he had come for nobody had any bones to pick with him although he had something going with Saulé. It was Lyovka they had been expecting. Isabek sent him a note by express post via efficient Faridá.

Volodya studied the boys' faces as far as that was possible on such a dark winter night and said, "Hello, everybody. I'm sorry I've got to disappoint you. Someone asked my friend Lyovka to come and have a serious talk with him but, unfortunately, he is otherwise engaged..."

A few days before Lieutenant Ryabov had sent for Volodya and the latter, in his usual diplomatic manner, had reported everything he deemed essential for the lieutenant to know.

"The lads are hopping mad!" he said. "Most people think that as Lyovka's mother's old, it's natural for her to have prejudices but he ought, of course, to live with the times. The lads reckon Kocharyan should wait until he's demobbed, marry his girl and then go home to his mother. Let her have a look at his bride first and if she still doesn't approve, they'll just have to leave home. In short, all the lads are of the same opinion but Kocharyan still can't make up his mind or, rather, she can't. Lyovka sent her a note via a lad called Salman but he came back with it saying she had refused to take it. Perhaps she felt offended... If you ask me, someone has got to stick up for him..."

* * *

When he accepted Isabek's insolent challenge on Lyovka's behalf, Volodya Muromtsev knew he was taking a risk but did not consider it was a very big one.

"Unfortunately, Kocharyan won't be able to come because he's seeing a girl from your school home."

Isabek shifted heavily from one foot to the other,
“Listen, you! What have you come here for, then?”

Volodya grinned condescendingly and said,

“Well, I’ve come, you see, to show my friend hasn’t got cold feet. Got it?”

“They’ve pulled a fast one on you!” little Kabish hissed angrily to Isabek.

Yerkin remembered a local saying to the effect that when a stranger comes into an *aul*, it isn’t the fiercest dogs you have to be afraid of but the smallest and most innocent-looking little one because while it doesn’t start yapping, none of the others will.

“Wait a minute, mate...” drawled Isabek slowly.
“I still don’t get why *you’ve* come!”

“Look, I’ve got ten minutes to spare!” said Volodya, glancing at the luminous face of his watch. “If any of you are itching for a fight, I could put myself at your service and stand in, so to speak, for my friend, Lyovka, who won’t be appearing in tonight’s show.”

Kabish rushed over to Isabek and hissed in Kazakh,
“Really sock it to him!” Volodya, however, could tell what he was saying by his excited gesticulation.

Yerkin then said in Russian for the benefit of both Isabek and the arrogant soldier,

“Stop fooling about! Come on, let’s go in.”

“No, wait a minute!” replied Isabek stubbornly.

“Look, we’ve got ten minutes!”

The lads from the tenth form began angrily muttering, “Oh, come on ... that’ll do... Let’s get a move on...”

Volodya did not look like a strong opponent to the shepherds’ sons. Lyovka was a great strapping fellow with thick curly hair all over his chest while Volodya

was slightly-built and sleek. Isabek was obviously far stronger and, what's more, would be fighting on home ground. What on earth, though, was the point of Chupchi's top wrestler throwing a puny soldier? Perhaps, just to put the score right and teach the soldiers not to put on airs and flirt with the *aul* girls.

"What are we standing here for? Let's get going!" Yerkin said to Isabek in Russian again so that the soldier understood.

The lads from the 10th form were not against leaving and looked peaceful enough but all the same they began moving back and clearing a space. Yerkin could tell that Isabek did not really want to fight and the Russian soldier obviously didn't either but it now seemed inevitable. Sometimes fights spark themselves off and there's nothing people can do to stop them. And then the weakest sort of people set in judgement over the strongest.

"Don't tell me somebody's got cold feet here?" goaded Kadish.

Yerkin could tell it was too late. He felt very sad for he suddenly realised that the puny, conceited soldier was going to beat Chupchi's top wrestler. Otherwise why would he have come here, looking so cock-sure?

"You must fight according to the rules!" Yerkin warned Volodya who opened his hands to show he wasn't holding a crowbar or knuckleduster.

Isabek pushed his friends further back.

"Don't get in our way!" he said advancing on his opponent.

What was he, Yerkin, staking on Isabek? He did

not know for certain. One thing he did know, though, was that Isabek simply had to beat the other even though he would not get back Aminá by winning the fight. Yerkin felt hot but not in the same way as when he was running. That was a healthy feeling but now he felt sticky. He heard himself murmuring, "You must win, Isabek!"

Kabish hissed viciously,

"Lay into him! Lay into him!"

Nobody even noticed what happened. One moment Isabek was bobbing foolishly up and down and the next he was sprawling on the trampled ground of the school-yard. He jumped up, hurled himself at Volodya and again crashed to the ground like a sack of potatoes.

So that was why he had come! He knew some secret techniques! In a trice he had twisted Isabek's strong arm and was standing over him.

"Well, how about it?" he asked, "Is that enough? Will that do?"

"Let me go!" roared Isabek.

"No, first say that's enough!"

Everyone fell silent and heard Isabek say on the ground,

"That's enough..."

He at once let go of Isabek's twisted arm.

Yerkin could not understand why he had let Isabek get into such an unfair fight when he had guessed he would lose. Although not very bright, Isabek had always relied on his strength.

Yerkin knew he felt calm and would not lose his temper but he still felt resentful and the bitter taste in his mouth reminded him of his resentment.

The lads from the 10th form began excitedly asking Volodya about his cunning techniques.

"No, it wasn't sambo. I used some Japanese techniques. All young Japanese lads are supposed to know them... No, we never lived in Japan, but my coach was Japanese and he taught me some very cruel and painful passes. Sambo's, in fact, taught in this country and if you like, I'll teach you a thing or two but only with the permission of your sports master. And I won't teach every single one of you because judo instructors aren't allowed to pass on their knowledge to children who haven't got the qualities of real sportsmen. So, have a word with your teachers and get them to contact my chief. Agreed?"

The boys began shouting excitedly about how they would get everything organised...

Volodya had a right to feel pleased with himself for he had not thought before of organising a judo club at the school and was now delighted at the idea of being able to leave his quarters in the evenings or on Sundays to come over to the school.

Yerkin could not know all the practical ideas Volodya had in mind but he saw that the latter was behaving in a dignified manner and not flaunting his success. He turned and walked away on his own without going up to Isabek because he had nothing to say to him.

The boys first saw Volodya off to the school and then went in themselves. Yerkin stayed behind in the yard on his own as he did not wish to see anyone.

Strips of light fell into the yard from the school hall's windows. The bus which had brought everybody from the cantonment stood in the shadows by the

porch. There was a smell of oil and metal coming from its cold engine. The lieutenant came out onto the porch and looked around. He must have heard something about what had happened and had come out to check.

After he had gone in, Vasya, who had obviously been sent by Seraphima Gavrilovna, came out for a snoop.

Yerkin forgot how long he had been standing there but it was probably not long because he was not wearing a cap but did not feel cold.

It was only now that he began thinking hard about something which he could have thought about much earlier, namely, whether everyone would be happy in the wonderful future life he envisaged in the steppe when he himself would be a strapping fellow driving around in his reliable cross-country vehicle, returning wearily to his warm spacious home in the evening.

Yerkin had grown used to the simple and rational way in which his future life was mapped out. No, he did not imagine it would be entirely carefree for he knew he would have to contend with the winter snow-storms and the scorching summer winds, and would have to work hard and struggle to survive. However, he never imagined anything happening in his future life similar to what had just happened to Isabek.

Yerkin had always admired intelligent, brave, kind and just people but he understood well enough that not only they had a right to be happy. No, he certainly did not think that. He wanted everybody in the steppe to be equally happy. However, he himself had

been born a weakling and had had to build up his strength himself. What's more, he was firmly convinced that he was not stupid. On the contrary, he was cleverer than the others, in short, he was a Sadvakasov!

So it appeared, and he was the first to admit it, that a better sort of life really was reserved for the clever, good-looking and talented ones like himself for, as an intelligent person, he had chosen it for himself, while a simpler sort of life was for the likes of Isabek. After all, what else did a dimwit like him need in life?

But what about Sholpan? What sort of life would she have? He recalled something he had always known: it was his duty now and always to protect her from all the unpleasant things in life.

He stood thinking of what to do about his future and how best to distribute all the eternal injustices when there would be so many good people and so much light and warmth in the future.

He at last felt cold and decided to go back inside. He did not want to see Masha now so he would get his cap and coat from the cloakroom and go home. The following morning a vehicle would arrive from the winter settlement to take all the children home to their families for the winter holidays and Yerkin would have two whole weeks to do what he liked in!

Lieutenant Ryabov was smoking in the school corridor. In a few minutes' time he was going to order his men to get ready to leave.

Down the corridor from the direction of the hall came Saulé, looking very beautiful, followed by the soldier who had just beaten Isabek. Yerkin was

furious with her for being with the person who had caused Isabek's downfall. Why could she not have picked anyone else?

"Where have you been?" she asked Yerkin.

He was amused by her off-hand and supercilious tone but his own reply sounded ever falser,

"I've been here all the time. You just haven't noticed me, that's all." (How could I stoop so low? Yerkin wondered.)

"How odd!"

She stood in front of the long narrow mirror while Volodya brought her coat from the classroom, adeptly helped her into it and kept his hands on her shoulders for a little longer than was necessary embracing her as it were, from behind, and gazing admiringly at the two of them in the mirror as if thinking, "What a splendid couple we make!"

Yerkin realised that was the way to do it: that was the way to help your girl into her coat, keeping your hands on her shoulders and exchanging glances in the mirror. He tried to remember every detail for the future.

Watching them leave, Yerkin was relieved to notice: they were walking side by side but had nothing real keeping them together. He had somehow learnt recently how to understand the relationships between couples. He was very surprised to see Sergei Li and Valya Vlasenko, for they were the quietest people in the class but they really did have something special going between them. He understood exactly how they felt towards each other when Sergei, blushing deeply, by chance touched Valya's hand in front of everyone. However, not even Faridá had noticed anything.

Lieutenant Ryabov glanced sympathetically at him and said,

"Learn to dance while you're young, Yerkin. Otherwise you'll end up like me... It's really true, if you don't dance, you start feeling sad. That's what parties are for, after all." The lieutenant really did look glum.

"Lieutenant, do you know of any accurate way of defining human happiness and how it can be attained?" Yerkin's question escaped him at what seemed the wrong moment but the lieutenant seemed to have been expecting this question and no other.

That day Ryabov had received a letter from a friend containing the sad news of the death of their mutual friend during some military tests. "It was a matter of chance but that's what our work is all about," his friend had written and Ryabov was possibly replying more to him than to the young schoolboy when he said,

"A tremendous amount has been written about happiness, that is, the happiness of all humanity and that of the individual, about different degrees of happiness. But you know, Yerkin, I don't think one person or even two can really be happy when all the others around them are unhappy. What they're feeling, can't be called happiness ... they're simply better off than everyone else..." Ryabov thought for a moment before continuing, "Tolstoy drew up five conditions of human happiness. The first was life in the sunlight and open air and contact with the earth, plants and animals. The second was satisfying work. The third was family life, the fourth, loving and free contact with people. Well, and the fifth is easier for

older people to understand and it's too early for children of your age to think about: the fifth condition is good health and a painless death."

"Is that all?"

"You reckon that's not enough?"

"No. It just sounds ... rather ordinary somehow. Everyone can have — life, sunshine, work, a family and contact with other people... You can have all that unless you're sick in hospital or doing time in prison like Salman's dad. Doesn't that mean just by living on earth, well, just by existing, you're already happy?"

"Yes, but let's just look at the first of his conditions: life in the sunshine and the open air. He didn't mean that going out for regular strolls with your walking-stick was good for you. If I remember right, you hope to build a life like that in the future, a life in the open air. You once told me yourself about your plans and how you hope to see the steppe in the future. Some things in it are going to be changed while others will go on just the same, year after year — for instance, you'll always see the same old tracks and the same people... That's right, isn't it? But look at your class-mate Masha Stepanova — she's travelled from one end of the country to the other and now here she is in your steppe where you've spent all your life. Or let's think about an old woman who's lived here all her life. Would you say she's had a monotonous life? I wouldn't. Every day's a new day. I once watched an old Kazakh woman dragging all her blankets, rugs and sheepskins out into the spring sunshine and hanging them all along her wall to air. Well, I thought, some people marvel at the awakening of nature while others put it to a practical

use. After she'd hung everything out, she tottered out of her yard and into the steppe, shielding her eyes with her palm as she gazed ahead and muttered something amusing to herself. Perhaps she was remembering her youth? She was well over seventy and had obviously seen spring arrive in the steppe numerous times before and already knew everything that was going to happen ahead of time but what difference did that make? It didn't mean she got less pleasure from seeing the spring than I did. On the contrary, it perhaps gave her more pleasure than me, as much pleasure as the number of times she had welcomed in the spring.

"Yes, I understood what you meant about sunshine and contact with nature," said Yerkin in a hurt tone. "But you don't have to have scientific tasks like Vitya or practical work to appreciate nature and the earth. You have to lead a full life! Man's got to experience everything in life — sorrow and joy and everything else. After all, if everybody becomes happy and stays so for ever, people will forget what happiness is all about. And then they'll forget how to live and how to notice changes and how to strive for something new."

"Yes, what you're saying is very true. One must lead a full life. My grandad was a gardener. I remember, one summer he took me into the orchard and showed me that all the apples were still green except one, which was deep red like in autumn. Then he said to me, 'Look at this apple and think why it is like it is.' I had a look at it but could not work out what my grandad was on about. 'Having a good think?' he asked me. 'Yes, but I still can't think of

anything.' 'I don't want you to think up anything cunning,' he snapped, 'The answer's staring you in the face!' I thought and thought but still could not come up with an answer and then my grandad said, 'Always remember that a bad apple always goes red before it's meant to and as it's not going to grow or ripen any more, it wrinkles and withers on the branch. The same thing happens to people so don't you be in a hurry to grow up before you're meant to...'"

Seraphima Gavrilovna glided into the corridor.

"Lieutenant Ryabov!" she said, "We're looking for you!" She was determined to end the evening as scheduled by ten o'clock. She glanced enquiringly at Yerkin and remarked to him, "There's something about you today I don't like!"

"I'm going now," said Yerkin, "Goodbye."

Yerkin headed for the door but to his dismay, he caught sight of Masha looking anxious.

"Are you leaving already?" she asked in surprise.

"No," replied Yerkin, thinking how Masha resembled Saulé in some way. It was nothing about her appearance but something he still could not put his finger on. "I was waiting for you." He found it easy to lie but then the bitter taste returned to his mouth. "Is your bus leaving soon? Let's go outside for a while. I've got something to tell you!.."

"Won't be a moment!" said Masha, putting on her coat which Yerkin had not been adept enough to pass to her! She put on her thick furry hat with long ear-flaps. (Yerkin had not noticed this wonderful floppy-eared hat before and wondered why the Kazakhs did not make ones like it.)

"What would you most like to change here in the steppe? Let's think about what we would most like to see come true in the coming year."

They went out onto the porch.

"I would like to see a lovely crystal-clear river flowing here with a green bank and white willows hanging over its water. But there's nowhere a river could come from here and no way of making willows grow and I don't think even on New Year's Eve one should make wishes that can never come true. Even if you invent things, they still have to be possible in real life..."

Yerkin clasped the soft furry ear-flaps of her cap in his hands and knotted them under her chin.

"Yes, you're right. One shouldn't wish for things that can't ever come true."

"Look, Yerkin, what a beautiful starry sky there is tonight!"

"Can you remember how we call the stars?"

"Yes, that's the Iron Staff ... isn't it? And the Seven Thieves are where they should be. Look, Yerkin, you can just make out the Birds' Way in winter."

"You're not cold, are you?"

They walked past the gates. Yerkin could not decide whether he was imagining things or whether a black figure really had just darted across the steppe. Perhaps it was Isabek roaming about. Yerkin did not call out to him because he did not want to speak to him just then. A wind was blowing up. At that moment a lorry with a plywood covered back came rumbling up to the school from the direction of the *aul*.

"It's Uncle Pasha. He's going to take the boarders home tomorrow."

"Is home far?"

"Not very. Only about two hundred kilometres!"

"We may be leaving for good soon."

"Yes, I know."

"You don't know anything, you really don't!"

"No, I don't," agreed Yerkin.

"I read somewhere about a project to turn some powerful Siberian rivers towards the dry steppes of Kazakhstan."

"Yes, I did, too."

"Then why did you agree that I was wishing for things which couldn't ever come true? Will there be a river here one day?"

"Yes, there'll be everything here one day, including a river. And there'll be a lot of people and a lot of happiness here. But what about you? Where will you be?"

* * *

The strange fellow in the pea-jacket strode straight towards the headlights out of the darkness, shielding his eyes with his huge hand which hid half his face and made him unrecognisable.

Pasha jammed on his breaks, opened his door and shouted,

"What's up? Are you drunk? Go and sleep it off!" He spoke in a natural, matter-of-fact way although for some reason he could not help wondering whether the fellow really was drunk because he seemed to be standing firmly on his feet.

The stranger slipped out of the headlights but

Pasha did not hear him walking away along the pot-holed road. Even a sober person wearing hefty boots like his would stumble in the dark but Pasha did not hear a sound. Where had the fool got to?

"Gimme a lift, mate!" Pasha heard him say very close-by and wondered how on earth he had got there.

"Going far?" Pasha was amused at the idea of letting the stranger get in and then driving him the remaining two hundred metres to the school. "All right, get in!" he could not let a person freeze in the wind, especially as he was a stranger to these parts, judging by the looks of him, and did not know the steppe and might therefore lose his way. Pasha tried to slam the door shut but the fool did not let go.

"Cut it out! Go round the other side! Go on, do you hear!" The door jerked away under his elbow and a huge hand clutched his throat. "What the hell!" yelled Pasha, resisting as long as he could but, as there was nothing for him to hold onto, he slipped slowly and limply off the smooth seat and flopped onto the ground.

The key! he thought in a flash and fumbled for the ignition key with his hand, which was almost numb, pulled it out and dropped it at once.

Now it's my turn, thought Salman quickly.

He had already crept up close behind the stranger when he spotted a spade wired to the side of the lorry overhead but quickly decided he would not have time to grab it. He caught sight of a cramp-iron inside the cabin, grabbed it and kicked the stranger hard on his shins. Then he crouched and leapt at him and dug all his fingernails into the man's Adam's apple

Everything was on his side except for his weight for he was as light as a feather.

The sickle in the sky went topsy-turvy and its sharp edge struck him in the side...

The next thing Salman knew, he was lying still on something very warm and although he could hear everything, he did not feel like saying anything.

Vitya's sister was kissing his forehead and cheeks and whispering,

"Salman! Are you all right? Salman, say something! Salman, where's the blood coming from? Oh, say something! I love you very much, Salman! Only, please, don't keep quiet, please, say something..."

Something warm was dripping onto Salman's cheek and trickling towards his lips and he opened his mouth slightly and tasted a salty tear like his own, but, in fact, someone else's.

Uncle Pasha began moaning nearby and then came to, sat up and began running his fingers across the ground.

"I dropped the key. Help me find it, quick!"

Salman could hear everything perfectly well but did not feel like opening his eyes or speaking. He lay still and thought about how he was going to have a long life in which he would see many things. He would never again be caught off-guard as he had not done so that day. No, he would always come out on top.

Yerkin tore after the thug into the boundless black steppe away from Chupchi's faint lights. He went through the contents of his pockets trying to remember if he had anything useful in them: he had a

pen, a silly little note pad, the lighter his brother Kenjegali had given him... Yes, the lighter would come in handy. Keeping the black figure in sight, he squatted, scooped together a heap of dry grass and flicked his lighter. The grass flared up and was instantly dispersed in sparks by the wind. Yerkin got up and raced after the stranger again.

"What was I just speaking to Masha about? A river. What was I going to say?" But he had stopped thinking when he and Masha had run towards the shout and caught sight of Uncle Pasha and Salman.

Yerkin flicked his lighter again and let the flame burn for a few seconds. Volodya suddenly appeared from nowhere and called,

"What are you messing about with that lighter for?"

"We've got to catch that thug. He's killed Uncle Pasha."

"The Pasha who's nicknamed Magellan?" asked the soldier, running beside him. "Is it someone local?"

"No, he's a stranger..."

"What did you light that grass with?"

"A lighter."

"Flick it again."

Yerkin lit some grass again and caught the soldier up.

The stranger stopped, panting hard, and turned to face them with his feet firmly planted in the ground and a defiant expression on his face, showing that anyone who came near him would be in trouble.

Volodya heard Yerkin panting for breath nearby and realised the boy was too weak to help. He could tell by the way the thug was getting ready to fight

that he was facing somebody strong, experienced and ruthless. What's more, this was not a gymnasium or Moscow side-street but the boundless wild steppe and it was pitch-dark and very windy.

"Why, he's a brute!" Volodya felt as if the icy wind was clawing at his heart. "What the hell am I doing?! Why on earth did I race after him instead of running to the school to raise the alarm among the lads? No, one should never act on an impulse for it's perfectly obvious that nothing good ever comes of it, no matter how splendid it may be."

Yerkin outstripped Volodya by seconds and lunged at the thug's hand which was holding a knife in the air. The latter was caught off-guard; making use of the split second, Volodya streaked like lightning as his judo instructor had taught him. Bang, crash, thud, a blood-curdling howl and the thug was lying flat on his mug in the slush and stones...

"Thank you, Simamura-san, it looks as if your keen pupil has just performed something that's called a heroic feat: 'without a moment's hesitation, Private Muromtsev charged and'... without a moment's hesitation, my foot! I couldn't decide for ages whether to or not."

"Have you got a belt, chum? An ordinary one to keep your trousers up!" Volodya helped Yerkin tie up the thug's heavy fists. "Well, now let's have a breather and a smoke and wait for the others to show up... You don't smoke? Well done! I've seen you somewhere before. Oh yes... You were at the fight. What's your name? Let's make a bit of light, Yerkin. Let's gather together some grass. Get my idea? Right then..."

Yerkin quickly piled together some dry grass.

"Is that enough?" he asked.

"Yes! Now set it alight!" Volodya enjoyed lighting his cigarette with Yerkin's lighter. "Where did you get this nice lighter from?"

"It was a present from my brother."

"And who's your brother?"

"A scientist."

"It's nice but what a pity it's not refillable. When the gas runs out, you'll have to throw it away."

"I'll fix it so that it runs on petrol."

"That's a good idea!" said Volodya, enjoying his cigarette. "Well, I'm glad I've met you." For some reason Volodya did not say anything to Yerkin about the split second in which Yerkin had outstripped him and hinged at the hand clutching the knife, catching the thug unawares. Did he not say anything on purpose?

Yerkin would never know how much he had helped at that crucial moment when a great deal in life was at stake for all his past was concealed in it, only to be miraculously transformed into another quality in his future life. But it did not really matter that he did not know, did it? What did matter was that he had done it.

Volodya took a long final drag on his cigarette and threw the butt into the bonfire. "None of the others seem in much of a hurry. You know, when the crunch came, I still couldn't understand why I'd rushed madly after him and not thought of getting the lads to help. But, I suppose, while they'd have got together, he would have been miles away. That's true, isn't it?"

"Absolutely!" Yerkin imagined going after the black shadow across the dark steppe and lighting dry grass. Yes, it was lucky for him that Volodya had suddenly appeared from somewhere, or, more precisely, from the hospital entrance-gate where he had seen Saulé home. He wondered if he had kissed her good-night and decided not to let it worry him. Yes, it had been lucky for Yerkin that Volodya had seen Saulé home that night.

Yerkin went off to gather some more grass and came back with a large armful which he threw onto the dying fire. The flame flared up high, scattering red sparks. The stranger rolled over onto his back and lay with his eyes open and dim lights gleamed deep inside his pupils. Yerkin recalled the wolf he had once killed and how he had seen the same lights glowing deep inside its narrow eyes.

"Come to?" asked Volodya.

The stranger glanced indifferently at the soldier, possibly taking him for a prison guard, and scowled at the lad with high cheek-bones who was lit up by the bonfire, and realised it was not Mazitov's snotty-nosed son.

"Tell that blinking kid, I'll get even with him when I get out again."

"I'll do nothing of the sort!" snapped Yerkin. "Why should I go and frighten him? But I won't forget what you said! And when you get out again, you'll have me to contend with!"

An army bus raced across the steppe towards the bonfire.

"Let's see who you've got, Muromtsev. Pasha's all right. The lad's been taken to hospital."

It now seemed to Yerkin that his conversation with Masha had taken place ages ago. He now realised that there had been no point in starting it up when he was thinking such hurtful thoughts and having such difficulty expressing them. He had now put them out of his mind and had no intention of recalling them. He knew he loved Masha and that was that! All he had to do was lead, as Tolstoy advised, a wholesome life in the open air.

The lieutenant came up to him and asked,

"Everything all right? Masha's crying and suffering from shock."

"Yerkin's a great fellow!" Volodya praised Yerkin and then began telling Ryabov in great detail how he had knocked the thug off his feet.

Yerkin thought the soldier was talking a lot. It meant he had been given a fright. He, too, had talked a lot about the wolf but when his father had explained why people in such instances gabbled away, he had forced himself to keep quiet about the wolf. But he did not blame Volodya for he, of course, had every reason to feel scared. He got the lighter out of his pocket and handed it to Volodya, saying,

"Here's a little gift to remember me by!"

"And this is from me to you!" replied Volodya, taking off his watch.

* * *

Masha's tears had done something to Salman. He felt himself getting older and weaker all the time.

A vehicle came crunching across the frozen ground

and some warm hands touched Salman's brow. He wanted to open his eyes but did not, reassuring himself he would have plenty of time to do so in the future because he had not been killed...

He was shaken and tossed about in the vehicle and all his thoughts got muddled up. He was not Salman, he was another boy of the same age who had been fired at but not killed by nazi. A battalion commander had found him among the dead, lifted him up and carried him away, telling him he was now going to live a long time. Salman rubbed his cheek against the prickly army coat and knew it was Vitya's father who was carrying him...

In the hospital Salman opened his eyes because he knew he could not hide from Dospayev.

Dospayev prodded him painfully somewhere below the ribs and said,

"You're lucky. If you'd been hit three centimetres this way, you'd^o have been in a bad way, chum."

Salman stared up at the fierce light without blinking and smirked.

"Didn't you think the thug might have a knife?" asked Dospayev.

"Oh, I knew about the knife!" replied Salman jauntily. "He'd already showed it to me. A big thing it was."

"I see! So you knew?"

It was only then that Salman noticed Vitya's mother in a white overall standing on the other side. How had she got there? Of course, she worked there! Be brave, Salman! You're too young to lose your wits yet awhile...

"I won't be needing you for the time being, Natalia

Petrovna," said Dospayev. "Get Manurá, the theatre nurse, to sew him up."

"No, I'd like *her* to do it!" said Salman, gazing exactly into Dospayev's eyes. "Please get her to do it!"

"Stay here, Natalia Petrovna," said Dospayev, who moved aside and fiddled with something and then turned to Salman, asked, "Don't you think you're being a bit too cheeky? Why are you bossing people about? You're not in charge here, are you?"

"No," replied Salman glumly.

"You're not here to give or take orders. You're here as a patient. It's dangerous in your condition to kick up a fuss. You must lie quietly even if you're feeling very brave."

Salman noted that Dospayev had begun speaking to him in a respectful tone, thereby acknowledging that Salman Mazitov was a hero. However, this did not make him feel any happier. On the contrary, he suddenly felt ashamed. Who had he been avenging, after all? A harmless girl! He had never before experienced this stinging feeling of shame for there had never been a reason for him to feel ashamed before but now here it was creeping up and stinging him. He hid his eyes, thinking "All right, I'll be quiet but don't think I feel proud: I was just lucky to get at him in time..."

Vitya's mother whispered in his ear,

"He's asleep. He's worn out, the poor darling! I'll go and tell Vitya. He's here and so is Masha and Museké's son and all his classmates. I'll tell them how he is now. What shall I tell them, doctor? The girls want to take turns in keeping watch over him."

"That's very commendable of them but it won't be necessary. Constant watch is kept on a patient only when it is considered advisable for the patient's well-being and not simply whenever anybody feels like doing so. Tell them all to go home."

"Right, doctor. Saulé's here, too."

"Well, especially if she's here!"

Salman found it hard and painful to think. "I mustn't think of anything," he told himself, "I must lie quietly and rest instead; it's time for me to forget everything bad I ever knew so that when I get out of here, I'll be able to turn over a completely new leaf..."

"Well, now he really is fast asleep," said Dospayev. "Good night, Natalia Petrovna."

CHAPTER FOUR

Yerkin woke up to the smell of eggs and bacon. Uncle Pasha and Ajanbergen had covered the light bulb with some newspaper and were sitting at the table.

"Already time to leave? Have I overslept?"

"What are you talking about! It's two in the morning! Just look, Yerkin, this lucky fellow in front of you has just become a dad." Uncle Pasha went on saying something and the man who had just become a father, who Yerkin saw was Ajanbergen from Thaelmann, grinned from ear to ear and looked relieved and blissfully happy. "If you don't feel like sleeping, Yerkin, come and join us and we'll have a chat and swap notes. Ajanbergen here is the most senior among us as he's the father of a two-hour-old son, weighing

three kilos eight hundred grams. Next in order of superiority comes me, first, because I've already done my military service and, secondly, because I'm married. And you're the youngest of us and still a bachelor. This is a very special night. But it doesn't matter that we haven't got anything to celebrate it with because I'm driving the kids home to Jinishké-Kum tomorrow. What does matter is, firstly, that a new person has appeared in the world tonight and started out on his life's journey and who knows whether one day he'll become a shepherd or a driver or something simpler like an academician. And, secondly, it's a special night for me in particular because my life was saved tonight by some miracle... Incidentally, when I do get a son, although mind you, my Tonya wants a girl, I'll definitely call him Salman in honour of my rescuer."

Yerkin crawled out from under his blanket, sat down next to the others at the table and began picking at a piece of fried eggs.

"What matters most in life?" Pasha pondered aloud. "Life's like a road you don't know. You have to try and spot every bump ahead of you in time to swing to the right and left. But you've also got to keep an eye on both sides of you and, most importantly, on what's far ahead of you. The bumps straight ahead won't tell you what's in the distance: it's up to you to peer ahead and see as much as you can... And by the time you get there an hour later, your eyes have already got used to everything... What I mean is, in life you've got to keep an eye on everything that's around you and in the distance, too."

Ajanbergen smiled blissfully and listened in silence,

or, perhaps, did not listen at all. Then Isabek stumbled sleepily out of the next room which Yerkin never used.

"Got any tea? I'm frozen stiff even though I wrapped myself in a rug!" He cupped his huge hands round the small bowl and sipped the hot tea slowly, gasping for breath and warming up. He did not ask any questions because he had come to Sadvakasov's hut feeling thoroughly wretched, and had fallen fast asleep and had therefore missed everything that had happened.

"Are you going home tomorrow?" asked Pasha.

"Nop," he replied. "The Head has put me down for some extra coaching. Otherwise I'll fail both my Kazakh and Russian language exams. And Seraphima Gavrilovna's set me tons of algebra problems." He was not evading the issue or telling lies because the Head really had not allowed him to spend the holidays with his relatives who were bound to ask him all sorts of awkward questions. What's more, he was bound to see Aminá there, and, worse still, everyone would be gossiping about how Chupchi's top wrestler had been beaten by a soldier from the cantonment. The Head could not have known about this yet but he might have foreseen it.

"You're doing the right thing, Isabek," praised Pasha. "A school certificate is worth getting at any price. But what do you want to do after school? Do you what to become a machine-operator or a shepherd?"

"Nop, I want to get into a military college. I'll go to a military registration office during the holidays and get it all fixed up."

"You want to go to college," said Yerkin, incredulously.

Ajanbergen went on smiling blissfully and saying nothing: his little son was already three hours old, his darling little son, who was like a small green bud on a mighty tree whose roots were deeply planted in this land.

"I want to go to the Alma-Ata military college and train as a border guard. We supply the college with horses. Then I'll ask to be sent to a section of the border which is guarded by mounted patrols. I'll serve here in the mountains or somewhere in the Caucasus." Isabek did not want to show that he had been beaten, but, on the contrary, that he had already forgotten what had happened that evening and that all his thoughts were now focused on the future. He had always been unobservant and was particularly so that night. Only later would he find out what had happened to Pasha and Yerkin and why Ajanbergen was beaming so joyfully.

Isabek had carried in a rug with an intricate black and white pattern. Yerkin remembered how his mother had made this rug, which was destined to be her last. Its black and white patterns were identical and all their swirls were perfectly interlinked. People's lives were completely different, too, but even so two different individuals sometimes met and joined together.

Yerkin ran his palm across the rug's smooth surface, feeling the black and white lines meandering along like rivers. The Kazakh pattern could probably be copied by machines but only with great difficulty. How hard it was to imagine that the pattern had

first been designed by totally illiterate peasants! It was just like someone waking up with a start in the middle of the night and shouting eureka!

Yerkin took a pile of blankets and cushions off the trunk, spread them all over the rug and lay down with the others. As he was falling asleep, he recalled with surprise how he had compared Masha to Saulé earlier in the day.

...He was again driving his cross-country vehicle across the steppe between flocks of sheep and herds of horses and picturesque *auls*. He saw a young forest in the steppe and water from Siberia flowing in riverbeds which had dried up and lain idle for centuries. He saw Vitya, a famous biologist, setting up electronic equipment by some gopher holes. Had the bluebird already arrived from India? No, but it soon would. And where was his sister now?

Isabek, wearing a peaked cap with a green band, was galloping towards him on a stallion with a fiery chestnut tail. Where was his cousin Isabek going? Yerkin went into his house and found his elder brother Kenjegali sitting and waiting for him on a rug on the floor. "Do you really think the people who have left Chupchi have done nothing to change the steppe? Don't forget, Yerkin, our Chupchi is part of a great union of people who all live together in harmony and peace..."

* * *

In summer it takes five hours to drive to the winter settlement from Chupchi but in winter you never know how long it will take.

It was still dark when Pasha Kolesnikov sounded

his horn by the boarding-houses' archway but Auntie Naskét had not only managed to rouse everyone who was leaving but had also given them a substantial meal. She gave them a lot of food for the journey, too. Whenever she saw her wards off, she not only saw to it that they were well fed before the journey but also gave the person in charge enough meat, bread and garlic to feed everyone on the way.

Nurlan drowsily ate the three-course meal along with the others but then decided not to leave with them because he knew perfectly well what to expect at the winter settlement. There were bound to be film shows, laid-on entertainment and a lecture on the international situation. No, he would rather hear Seraphima Gavrilovna wish him a Happy New Year in a couple of days' time. You see, she had not had a chance to the day before because Lyovka had rushed the alarm and everything had been stopped abruptly. What's more, he was used to seeing in the New Year in style and not just any old how. He went back to his dormitory, flopped onto his bed and told Askar (the first-formers did not go home for the holidays) to lock the dormitory door from the outside and wake him up at one o'clock. Then he would go over to Kolya's or Masha's or even try knocking at the major's door...

Faridá could never have imagined anything like this would happen. She had especially arranged to stay with her Aunt Gulya at Jinishké-Kum. Can you guess why? Because of Nurlan! And now everybody was already sitting in the back of the lorry, everyone, that is, except for Nurlan who was a missing link. Uncle Pasha glanced inside and invited Sholpan to

join him up front but she declined and Nurlan was still nowhere to be seen. Somebody ran to look for him but his dormitory door was locked. And so they left without him and Faridá could not very well jump out of the lorry and make herself a laughing stock. However, she had at least been shrewd enough to climb into the front where it was warmer. Pasha still did not know how lucky he was! This chatterbox would never let him doze.

It had become hot and steamy in the back but the plywood planks creaked coldly behing Yerkin. On the bench opposite sat Sholpan in a plush coat and warm shawl.

The younger ones were crunching the boiled sweets they had been given as they were leaving. None of them had any luggage because the boarders were only allowed to take their felt boots, sheepskin coats and fur hats home in spring when they put them away in their family trunks. In spring when a closer eye was being kept on the number of sheep and feeds in the collective farms, all the lazybones at school began to put on a spurt because in the steppe no other month was considered most favourable for turning over a new leaf and making new resolutions than March, which marked the beginning of the Muslim New Year.

“Dudarai-dudar, dudarai-dudar...” the girls sang softly and their voices were interwoven in the song like threads on a spinning-wheel and the song spun lightly along, getting stronger like thread in nimble hands. Yerkin did not even notice how his own voice became intertwined in the song.

And it all was composed by Maria, Mariam, Masha.

The door of the cabin was open and Yerkin could see the black and white track running backwards. When you sit facing in the opposite direction to the one you are travelling in, you always feel as if you are looking at the world through a looking-glass because everything seems back to front. Yerkin stood up and slammed the door shut.

The low steppe wind plaited the scanty snow into white braids.

Salman was still sleeping all on his own in the hospital ward, the same one Sholpan had once seen Askar's grandmother asleep in.

He woke up and opened his eyes and saw someone standing against the light. Thinking it was Vitya's sister, his heart beat faster but when she turned round, he recognised Saulé Dospayeva. It was then Salman realised that he had lost his sharp intuition and become muddle-headed for he could not make out what she wanted or why she had come or what she could have left behind here.

"What's up?" he asked cautiously.

"Oh, you're awake!" she replied, moving closer.

Saulé did not usually do the rounds of the wards but here she was standing in front of him. Perhaps she would not become an astronomer, after all, but come back to Chupchi to work as a doctor? Who knew? It was anyone's guess.

Salman glanced askance at her. He could, of course, have said something, but remained silent because he did not recognise the value of words.

The door opened and in came Vitya and his sister

in white overalls. Salman was furious because it was his friend, Vitya, he wanted to see and not these girls, who had no business being here.

Wincing with pain, he sat up in bed, looked out the window and watched the two girls walking towards the gates.

The Head came out onto the school porch and gazed into the steppe which was dotted with snow like a blackboard with chalk. Two figures were walking across it and he could not make out or guess who they might be.

"You're on your last legs, you moth-eaten old goat!" he muttered angrily to himself.

"Whenever you get something right, don't forget to tick yourself off for always having thought that all the others could do everything while you couldn't even though you're so clever and marvellous," he used to say to his pupils.

He could say that to his pupils but what could he say to an old man like himself? Never mind, this old school headmaster nicknamed the Head wasn't going to upset Seraphima Gavrilovna...

The wrinkles on his face expressed an emotion which not even Seraphima Gavrilovna could have found a name for: the two coming across the steppe were both from the eighth B form and they were none other than Saulé Dospayeva and Masha Stepanova.

At about the same time in the cantonment a report was being read out to the formation on the courageous act of Private Muromtsev who had detained a dan-

gerous criminal. Volodya stepped forward and stood to attention, looking truly dashing.

The low steppe wind had stopped plaiting tight braids of snow and was shaking them loose. By the looks of things, a storm was brewing.

The lorry carrying the boarders drove further and further into the open steppe leaving fragile strains of music behind it. And for many kilometres there would be nothing but steppe all around, boundless wild steppe which had taught its inhabitants to welcome any stranger who came to their doors and to understand one another and live with other nations in harmony and peace.

On the bench opposite Yerkin, Sholpan, who had wrapped her shawl around her head in such a way that only her eyes could be seen, was swaying in time with the song. Yerkin imagined her thoughts were already miles away at home, and she was thinking what she could do with her untiring hands when she got there. He was wrong, however, because she was thinking about something very close by.

Yerkin wrapped the folds of his sheepskin coat more tightly around him and leaned back. The frozen plywood planks began creaking more loudly and little pebbles flew up from under the wheels and the engine droned smoothly. No, there was certainly nothing better in life than getting up early and riding towards the new day.

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